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STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC

BIOWARE'S QUEST TO REINVENT THE MMORPG

IPHONE GAMING ON TEST

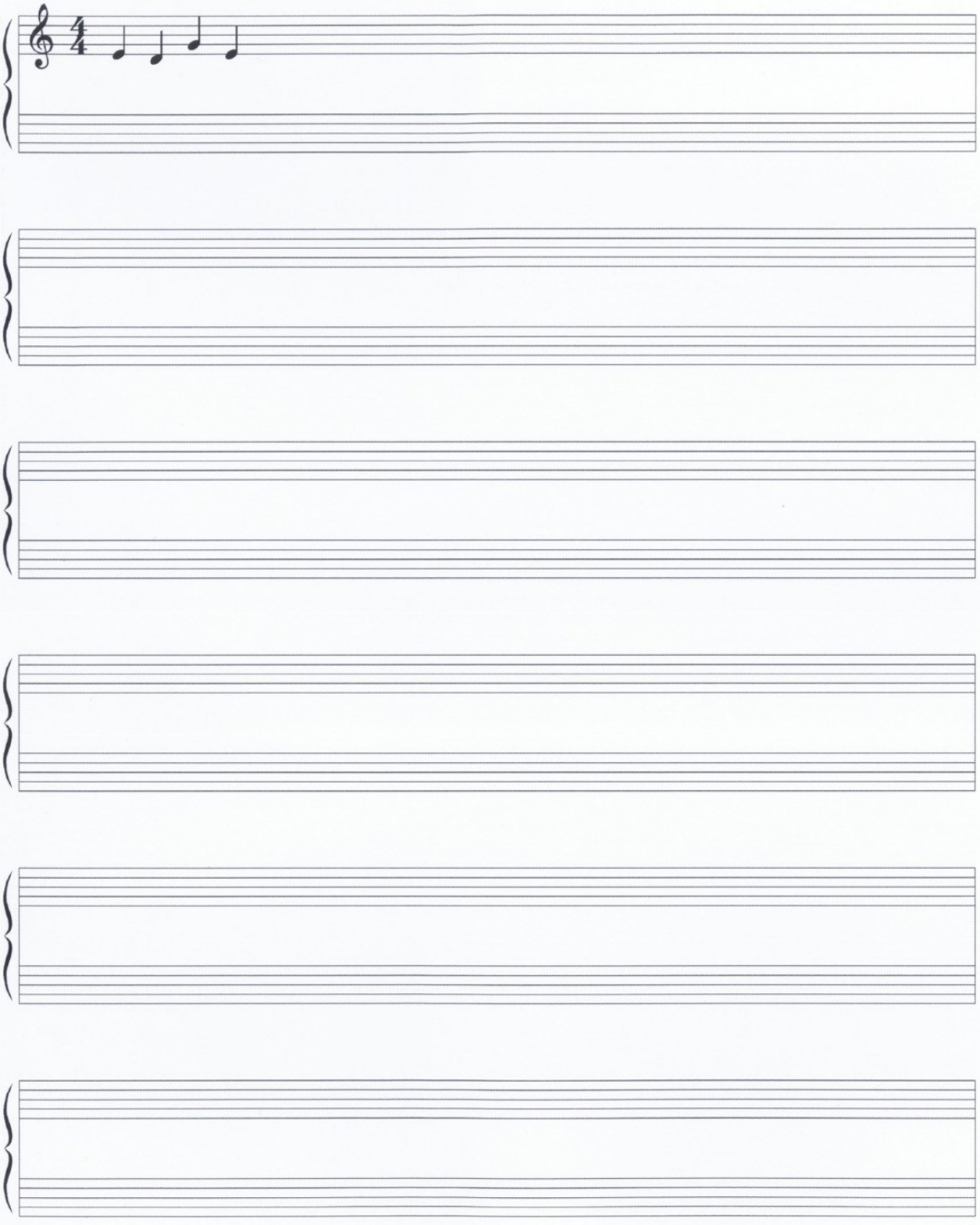
HOW APPLE'S HANDHELD REALLY STACKS UP

21 REVIEWS INCLUDING

RESISTANCE 2, MIRROR'S EDGE, TOMB RAIDER: UNDERWORLD, CALL OF DUTY: WORLD AT WAR, GEARS OF WAR 2, ENDWAR, LEFT 4 DEAD, FALLOUT 3, GUITAR HERO: WORLD TOUR & BANJO-KAZOOIE: NUTS & BOLTS

MIYAMOTO UNPLUGGED

NINTENDO'S GRAND MASTER TALKS HARDCORE GAMING, MAKING MUSIC AND WII'S FUTURE





Prior to our meeting with **Shigeru Miyamoto** for this issue's cover story, the article in **Edge** 193 concerning Nintendo's apparent manoeuvrings away from its traditional fanbase and into the arms of a new demographic is still something of a talking point, and we come to understand that it has been the cause of some consternation at the company. The 'H' word isn't directly used by Miyamoto during our time together, but Nintendo's standpoint when it comes to addressing its more established followers appears to be something he is keen to tackle.

"I would say that one thing Nintendo has always done is that we look at videogames as being entertainment," he states. "From that perspective, we look at games as something that everyone should be able to enjoy. We've never developed our games to be only for videogame fans. With Wii, we've managed to finally turn videogames into something that everybody can relate to, to make them something that's relevant to them, that they're not afraid to pick up and play, and I'm very grateful for that. It's not just a PR slogan or something we have adopted recently."

The general manager of Nintendo Company Limited's entertainment analysis and development division has put the company's position on record, and we move on – to *Wii Music*, his latest project, and something close to his heart, not only because he's always been a keen amateur musician but because he believes it has benefits that may go beyond being able to hold your own when discussing effective techniques for dispatching particularly stubborn *Metroid* bosses. The interview begins on page 58.

There is no *Metroid* boss discussion elsewhere in this issue, but given that this is officially our Christmas edition it naturally carries reviews of some of 2008's biggest releases, many of which do not involve the playing of flutes or violins and focus instead on shooting things in the face with heavy-duty automatic weaponry of varying calibers. That includes the likes of *Left 4 Dead* (p82), *Gears Of War 2* (p86), *Call Of Duty: World At War* (p90) and *Resistance 2* (p91). Something for everyone this issue, then.





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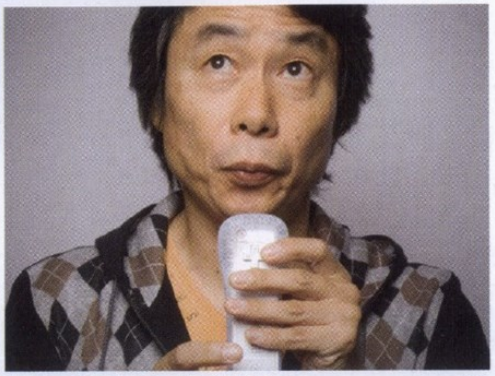
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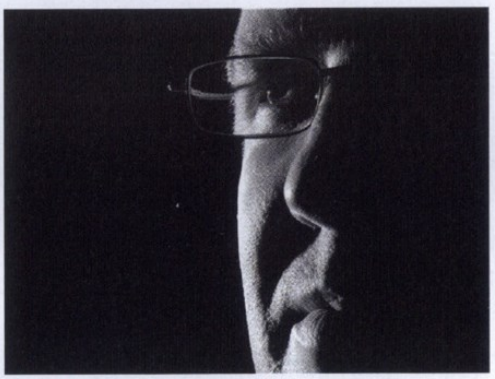
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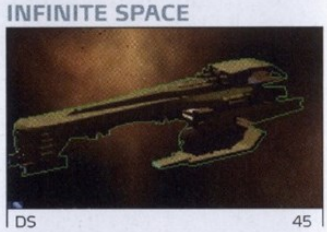
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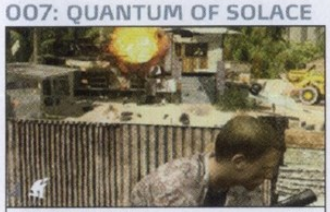
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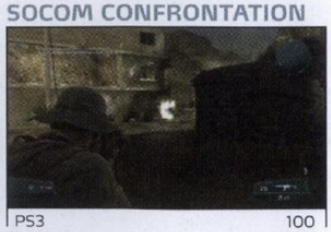
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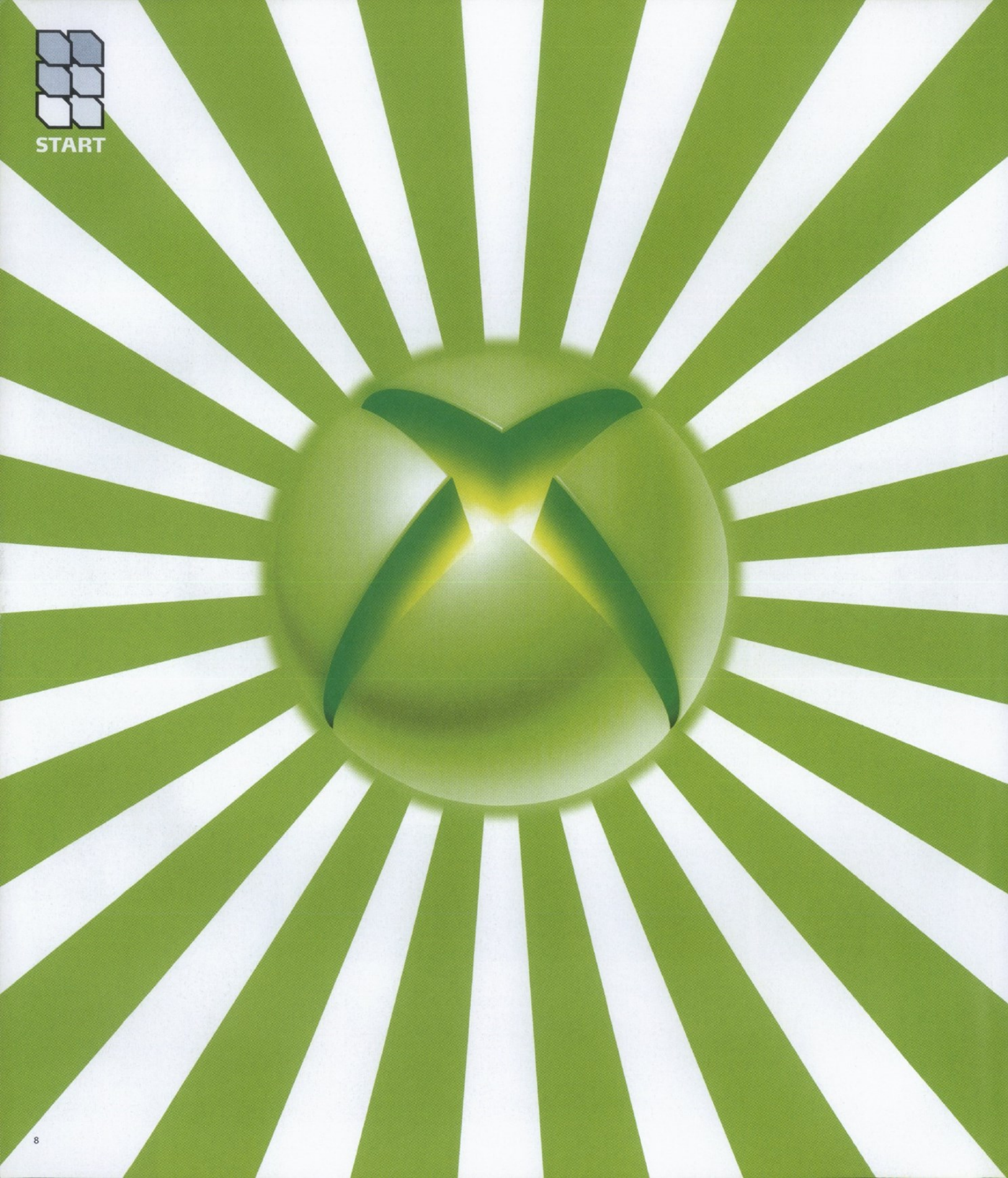
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START

HARDWARE

Japan's 360 turnaround

For weeks on end, Xbox 360 sales have outperformed PS3 in Japan – has the sun finally risen for Microsoft's box?

By the time that Tokyo Game Show 2008 kicked off back in October, a fair few people had already snaffled a copy of Weekly Famitsu, intended for release the following day. It showed Xbox 360's hardware sales ahead of PS3's in Japan for the fourth week in a row (it has remained ahead ever since, at least at the time of going to press). It set the tone for Microsoft's ballsy push into the Japanese market that was to be made evident at the convention. With the price of the console now below that of Wii in Japan, and its gaming catalogue promising tasty software deals with Japanese publishers like Square Enix, can Xbox 360 really conquer a region that previously seemed so very uninterested in what it had to offer?

With the console's price now below that of Wii in Japan, and the promise of tasty software deals with Japanese publishers, can Xbox 360 really conquer the region?



Japan-friendly titles took the fore at Microsoft's TGS booth, but can 360 build loyalty with exclusivity deals?

Xbox 360 has had something of brand image problem from the outset in Japan – its predecessor was widely ridiculed for looking like a space-crate, and for its awkward weight and size, while its range of titles did little to pander to Japanese tastebuds. Although Xbox 360 has improved in each of these areas, there is still a pervasive distrust of this non-Japanese-designed console, reinforced by hardware failure scandals and compounded by the fact that it can feel like a battle to hear the sound of The Cole Train cutting someone in half with a chainsaw when the console's disc drive really cranks into action.

However, the main sticking point for Xbox 360 in Japan – the perceived western bias of its game catalogue – is changing quickly. Early on, Microsoft managed to tug a few Japanese franchises away from PS3 exclusivity as developers struggled with the complexity of

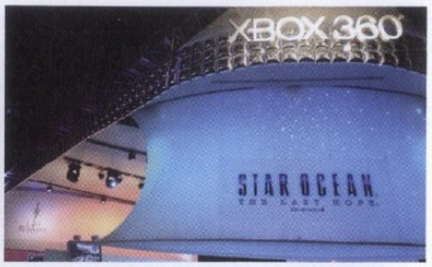


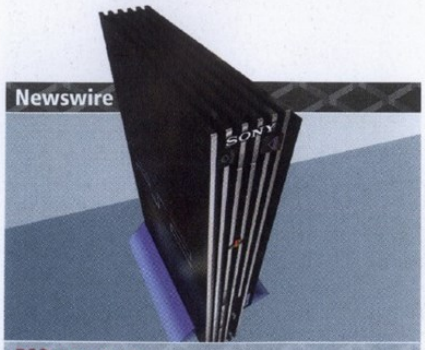


Though Microsoft made a concerted effort to court Japanese interest, western games like *Halo 3: Recon* dominated TGS



While Microsoft has a robust line-up for Japanese gamers, it will have to interest them in Xbox 360's other charms, such as its online capacity, if it wants to ensure enduring success for the console. The risk remains that 360s might otherwise flood the secondhand market when the exclusive JRPGs dry up





Newswire

PS2 opens up

At the recent Casual Connect conference in Kiev, Ukraine, it was announced that the certification process for PlayStation 2 has been ended – at least in Europe. George Bain, Sony Europe's developer relations manager, said developers will no longer need to submit content to Sony for approval, citing recent games from Russian and Indian software houses as examples of the likely benefactors. Western gamers may now be a little sniffy about Sony's old console, but it's a cheap and powerful machine with an installed base topping 131 million worldwide. While it's still unclear whether Sony will extend this approach worldwide (Bain later talked of a "global approval system" that would allow applications to be made through a central website), it could be a new lease of life for the platform in rising markets. Kaz Hirai's words concerning hardware generations – "All has not been said" – have rarely seemed more apt.

SCE's platform. But it's only more recently that the sea-change has really occurred, following a concerted effort by Microsoft to turn Xbox 360 into the premier JRPG platform. Its booth at TGS placed these games at the front, leaving only a small, adults-only space at the back for western titles – an attempt to present 360 as being specifically for Japanese gamers, helped by the association with Microsoft's neighbouring booths, Square Enix and Capcom.

In stark contrast to previous years, the area around Microsoft's stand was far busier than the slim pickings to be had in SCE's hall, and while gamers still seemed to prefer the two-hour-long queue to play *Resident Evil 5* at the Capcom booth over the much shorter one on the 360 stand, few would have missed that the company enjoyed a lot more interest this year as a result of its positioning – both physically and philosophically.

Whatever negotiations occurred to ensure the release of Square Enix's games on Xbox 360, the publisher was ebullient about the console's prospects in Japan

Microsoft gave pride of place at its own stand to Square Enix's 360 releases *Star Ocean 4* and *The Last Remnant* – the former having no intended release on PS3, the latter an unconfirmed future date for Windows and PS3. Whatever negotiations occurred behind closed doors to ensure the release of Square Enix's games on Xbox 360, the company was ebullient about the console's prospects in Japan and emphasised the global reach the platform would give its games.

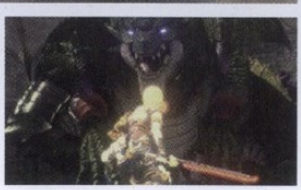
"We expect the Xbox 360 to increase its Japanese market presence even more in the coming months," Square Enix's **Shinji Hashimoto**, producer on *Einhänder* and *Kingdom Hearts 2*, tells us. "There is a growing interest in Xbox 360 among Japanese users, due to the release of familiar titles, the increasing appeal of overseas titles, and the excellent reputation of the Xbox 360's network services."

However, success of Xbox 360 in Japan is not necessarily vital to Square Enix's strategy. "Square Enix develops its titles for users all around the world," Hashimoto says. "We would not make decisions regarding hardware based solely on the Japanese user base. [*Star Ocean 4*, *Last Remnant* and *Infinite Undiscovery*] were developed with the global market in mind, so by releasing them on the Xbox 360, which enjoys a high market share in the United States and Europe, we are hoping to gain more recognition from this large user base."

It has already tested the waters with *Infinite Undiscovery*, the sales of which seem to have rapidly tailed off in Japan since its September release, but are slow and steady in the US and Europe at the time of writing. Square Enix has higher hopes for *Star Ocean 4* and *Last Remnant*, and the arrival of *Final Fantasy XIII* on 360 does much to shore up the console's reputation among JRPG fans – no longer is it just the space marine shooter's platform of choice.

Is Japan ready to fall in love with Xbox 360? Not quite yet. While gamers are picking up the reduced-price 360 in order to buy these games, with SCE unwilling to push PS2 titles and PS3 losing its grip on Japanese content there is little choice in the matter. Xbox 360's popularity is, for the moment, a matter of circumstance. Titles well

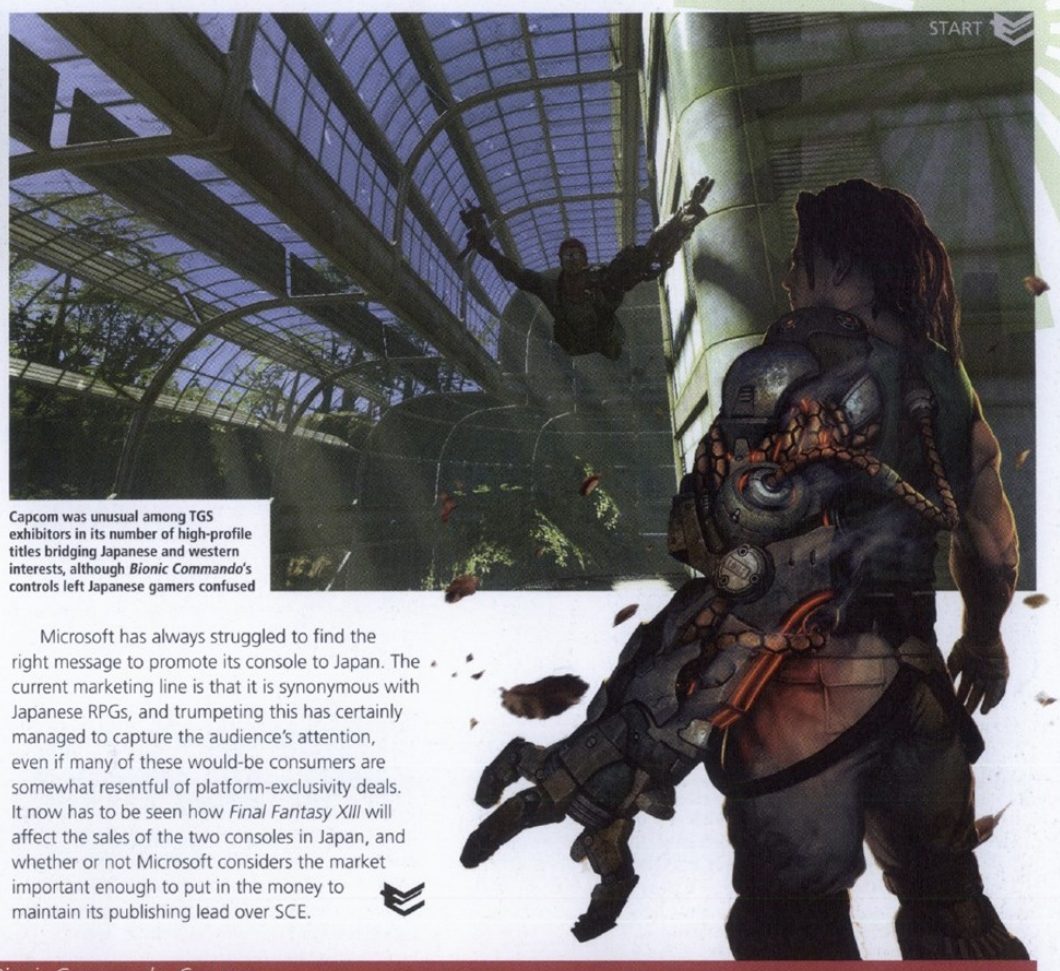




Hashimoto was cautious of making claims for the trio of 360 RPGs, *Last Remnant* (above), *Star Ocean 4* (right) and *Infinite Undiscovery* (far right), saying that Square Enix would "like to take a long-term view in regards to sales"







Capcom was unusual among TGS exhibitors in its number of high-profile titles bridging Japanese and western interests, although *Bionic Commando*'s controls left Japanese gamers confused

loved in Japan such as *Ace Combat 6* are still 360 exclusive, and even games that are coming to PS3, such as *Trusty Bell*, are taking a long time to do so. It's clear that Microsoft thinks there are still plenty of gamers holding out for PS3 versions of 360 games, or at least analogues of those games, which are yet to arrive: the recent boost in sales has seen the console being bundled with both *Ace Combat 6* and *Beautiful Katamari* – games which may not be the most recent, but nonetheless appeal directly to a Japanese audience starved of such products on competing systems.

But there is little sign that Japanese gamers are investigating Xbox 360's offerings outside of the games which fuelled their initial console purchase, and an unscientific measurement of the crowd at TGS also suggested that there is still limited interest in western games. The secondhand console market is lively in Japan, and Microsoft should be aware that the sales it has generated will not necessarily lead to platform loyalty. Having created a captive audience, it now has a real chance to court gamers who might otherwise think of it as a disposable means to an end while they wait for SCE to catch up.

Microsoft has always struggled to find the right message to promote its console to Japan. The current marketing line is that it is synonymous with Japanese RPGs, and trumpeting this has certainly managed to capture the audience's attention, even if many of these would-be consumers are somewhat resentful of platform-exclusivity deals. It now has to be seen how *Final Fantasy XIII* will affect the sales of the two consoles in Japan, and whether or not Microsoft considers the market important enough to put in the money to maintain its publishing lead over SCE.

BEN JUDD & ULF ANDERSSON Producers, *Bionic Commando*, Capcom

For those who could tear their eyes from the cosplay annex, this year's TGS saw the inner turmoil of Japan's game industry made public. Typically reserved executives brought passion (and pessimism) to their keynotes, while their studio booths brought little, the showfloor dominated by western titles. Stealing the biggest queues was a solid and truly global display from Capcom – a reward, perhaps, for its steady courtship of western developers and unflappable in-house values. Key to those is veteran expat producer Ben Judd who together with *Bionic Commando* producer Ulf Andersson offered his thoughts.

What did you think of the showfloor this year?
BJ: Not impressed. I don't want to toot my own horn or anything, but the Capcom booth probably has the most major titles, and we're ranked about sixth of seven in terms of profitability. I think this year's going to be a pretty tough one for Japanese publishers. You go to the Sony booth and it's pretty much western games – it doesn't put a lot of faith in me for the future of the Japanese games industry. TGS itself might now have to encompass more anime, more manga – more universal stuff.
UA: More like Comic-Con.

Why so few announcements this year? It's not like E3 or Leipzig stole them.
BJ: Japanese publishers are traditionally more conservative – maybe they wanted to wait and see which hardware was going to pan out before starting production. And since it's been one of those tough-to-decide

> "Japan's publishers are traditionally more conservative – maybe they wanted to wait and see which hardware was going to pan out before starting production. And maybe they didn't start fast enough"

kind of things, maybe they didn't start fast enough. And they're not making as many original games so there's not that much to announce. Oh, look, another *Castlevania* game.

How about *LittleBigPlanet*? What are its chances here?
BJ: It stands a better shot than most. If you look at western games in Japan, the ones that have done the best have traditionally been platform games: *Crash Bandicoot*, *Jak & Daxter*, etc. But still, I can't see it doing anything better than what *LocoRoco* or *Patapon* do. It'll sell to that same target group, which is, what, a million units?

Where does Capcom stand now in its relationship with the west?
BJ: There are two phases, I think. Phase one was the *Dead Rising*, *Lost Planet* stage – our Japanese studios trying to design western games. Now it's about having a Japanese publisher work with western developers; let's have our US office create more product. Because five years ago we had *Final Fight: Streetwise*, and that was pretty much: 'OK, let's not let the US make any more games'. But we can't stop trying until we've found the right connection because international markets are so important.

How was *Bionic Commando* received at your booth?
BJ: People have been lining up for it, which is good. But it's a smaller booth compared to some of the major titles, and that's because it's just not as Japanese-centric. A game that has the sort of controls that this one does: I've seen the western press play it and pick it up in five minutes, and I've seen the Japanese press be confused by it for ten, 15, 20 minutes. They walk around in circles not knowing what to do. And you're just sat there, going: 'Why is the camera looking up at the ceiling?'

Is there a fallacy there, then? Some people tend to associate Japanese consumers with 'hardcore' gaming.
BJ: There's a ton of casual Japanese gamers – casual to the point where they need to be led around. They've created some extremely linear action games. But when it comes to timing, combos and fighting games, that sort of precision is where you see them become hardcore. They're the best *Street Fighter IV* players in the world because they focus on those details.

Western games seem to be tuning in to Japanese styles – *Dead Space* and *Dark Sector*, for example. Why now?
UA: A certain generation of people has grown up with Akira, Ghost In The Shell, that kind of thing. Remember the original concept for *Dark Sector*? Extremely anime in style. It's a source of influence rather than a target market. A lot of developers don't think about where to sell their games, they just think what they're doing is cool. You know where *Killzone* comes from, right? [Mamoru Oshii's manga, Kerberos Panzer Cop.] Maybe that's a style that goes well everywhere, the whole WWII stormtrooper thing.



Ben Judd Ulf Andersson

BJ: But if you were to take *Dark Sector* and play it side by side with a Japanese game, the Japanese would know right away that it's western. They can point that shit out right away. And the moment it happens, that's it – it's bracketed into that hardcore who sometimes buy western games.

So the old prejudice isn't going anywhere soon.
BJ: No, but the one thing that does give me hope is that, looking at Sony's booth, whether it's out of necessity or a plan of attack, there are more western titles. And the more that get thrown into the channel, and the more Japanese gamers get used to this game style, the more it'll become the standard.

SOUND BYTES

"While always describing their *Battlefield* games as 'cinematic', DICE forcibly limited the aspect ratio to a decidedly non-cinematic ratio of 4:3. Additionally, they helped foster the idea that playing in widescreen constituted 'cheating'."
The cads. The first ever **Field of Vision awards** include a Narrow Minded anti-award to developers 'who actively discourage or prevent support of widescreen displays'

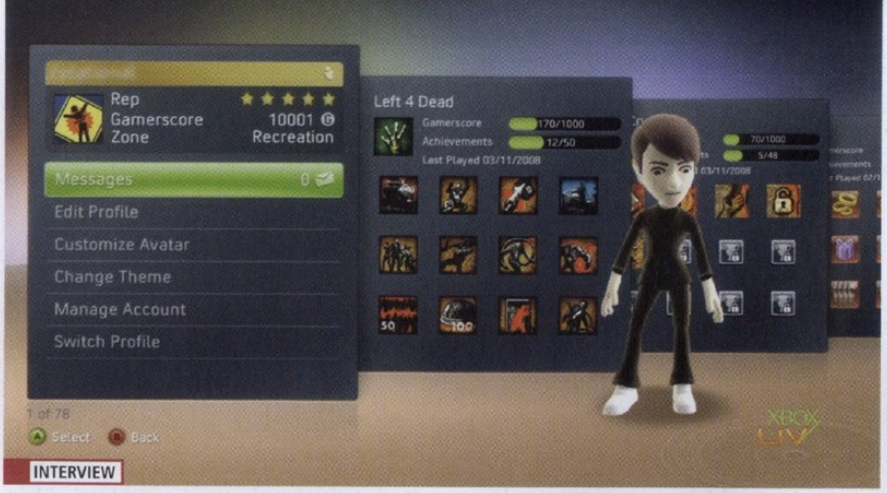
"Since you have the first 19 characters of the code already, you can basically try 'guessing' the last character. To do this, simply enter your existing code, and then for the last character, try the letters A-Z, and then the numbers 0-9."
EA customer support shows a very practical form of sympathy for the unfortunates who bought *Red Alert 3* and received incomplete 'bonus' redeem codes

"A beta is like hooking up with a girl just to say, 'Yeah, I fucked her'. I know that sounds crude, but it's the honest-to-God truth. Once you play a beta, you can check it off your list – you can say, 'Yeah, I played it'. Then you might not feel motivated to get that initial cherry popping from the proper, final game."
Cliff Bleszinski seems to be encouraging everyone to start calling him CliffyB again

"This car's like a wake-up call. By the time I get to work, my heart's pumping and I'm ready to crank."
Bleszinski again, this time paying homage to the role his red Lamborghini Gallardo Spyder takes in making *Gears Of War 2* what it is

"I was secretly playing a lot of *Rock Band*."
Grace Kim, Playboy's Miss November, reveals another possible reason why she left her job as PR lead for *Guitar Hero*

"*World Of Warcraft* is a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (in similar vein to *Starcraft* and *Second Life*)."
The Times' Body & Soul section attempts to explain the confusing world of MMO gaming to its widows – and possibly muddles things even further



INTERVIEW

Euro vision

How Xbox 360's new online head intends to revise Live for Europe


Johnson has much experience of working on Live, but most of his new team will be from Europe to ensure relevance to the market

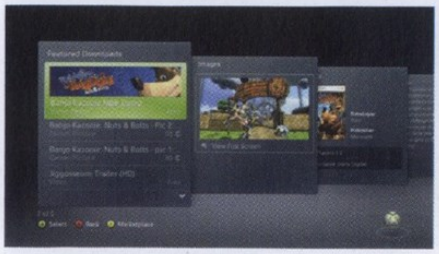
Having worked on Xbox Live since its inception in 2002 and headed up the software team that created the new 360 dashboard, **Jerry Johnson** has just taken a new role as general manager of Xbox Live Europe. It's part of Microsoft's new emphasis on catering directly to the European market instead of leading it all the way from Microsoft's Redmond headquarters. We met to talk about how he intends to make Xbox 360 more attractive to the complex tapestry of cultures that make up – in VP of Live, software and services John Schappert's words – Xbox 360's new 'battleground'.

"There were times when I couldn't sleep because I didn't know that we were going to be able to pull this off this year. We were worried about performance from the get-go"

You've just been brought across to head Live in Europe – is this a brand new role?
It's part of this commitment to Xbox Live. We're going to be a smaller group – I was heading about 140 software people at Redmond, but this is about 30. We're not bringing 30 Americans over to do this, it's going to be me and a senior engineer coming over and we'll hire people from continental Europe and the UK with the goal of creating experiences that are very appropriate to the European market. Last week I was in Spain and it's clear that you can't build experiences for Europe from the United States. It just doesn't work – it doesn't have the right flair, the right perception – whatever you call it.

Is it a visual thing, or a content thing?
I think it's very much a content thing; it's an experience thing more than anything. You go into southern Europe and it's sports and social aspects that are the most important. One of the things we've always been asked the most is: "Why doesn't Xbox Live have matchmatching by country?" And our answer is that this doesn't help you find people – if you start to limit your audiences when you're having trouble finding enough people, filtering it down more doesn't help you get a group together. So we're going do some things that go after the social aspects. I don't know what the answers are – whether it's things that tie together interests that are relevant to each market to allow people to do social things together, or heatmaps. We'll build apps into the dashboard that will do this, because the dashboard is no longer static.

So these would fit into the dashboard as new slots?
Yep – not to draw too much of a parallel, but



The new dashboard needs more storage space than the original, meaning that for users with no HD the 64Mb memory units are no longer enough to hold a full profile plus apps such as the avatar creator. Johnson says only two per cent of users who use Live lack HDs, however



Johnson says that the biggest usability issue Microsoft has had with the 360 pad is with the guide button – some users don't realise it is one. The new dashboard therefore includes many more prompts to encourage you to press it



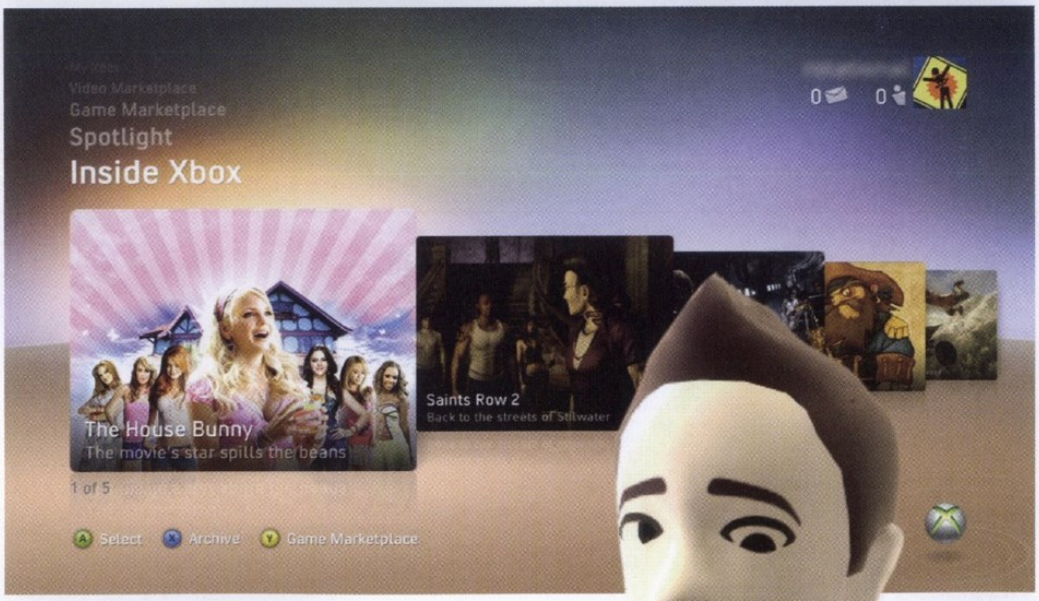


think about what we did for Netflix in the US. That was a separate application, something that shows up as a slot and downloads on first use, and geared specifically to the US market. When we come over here we can pick out certain pieces of content, certain social activities that we'll be able to go off and make specifically for this market. When you think about games, Rare has a lot of interest in this too, you have entertainment experiences and games. What Live allows you to do is bring these two things together and wrap social experiences around them. You'll start to see some crossovers that aren't really games and aren't really entertainment. We've the opportunity to use all the changes we've made to the platform and make some things for the market over here, and we don't have to wait for Redmond to make them a priority.

Can these apps be made by external companies as well as your team?
Yes – we'll have an engineering staff here and also be working with some partners. Netflix and the photo sharing app are examples: Netflix was done internally, and we asked a company in San Diego to make the photo app. We had to open up the API to some elements that we don't allow games to access, so we had to work in partnership. I think you'll see both those models.

Will these apps ever cost users money?
As a business we make money through transactions, subscriptions and advertising, so whenever we bring content on we evaluate how it will drive customer behaviour. If it encourages people to get on the service and do other things, maybe we'll make it free. If it's niche or requires licensing rights, it could be transaction-based.

The new dashboard runs very smoothly, even with the amount of additional media that it has to download – did you ever fear that you wouldn't be able to achieve that?
Yeah! There were times I couldn't sleep because I didn't know that we were going to be able to pull this off this year. We were worried about performance from the get-go, especially with all the graphics we wanted. If you look at other stores on consoles – think pictures popping in when you're trying to browse content – we realised that doesn't fly. We spent a lot of time concentrating on pre- and predictive caching, so as soon as we're connected you're getting stuff. It mustn't impact anything else that's going on, but we wanted there to be no waiting for stuff to pop in. It was nerve-wracking.







WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

The games you'll never get to play are somehow more essential than the ones you do. They made promises, and never arrived to live up to them – or to disappoint. However ludicrous it may be to yearn for unfinished, buggy and beta videogames that probably aren't really all that fun to play, they're still the ones that got away. Unseen 64 knows how you feel, and has amassed a considerable collection of screenshots, videos and even the odd piece of concept work relating to things cut from games, ideas that never made it in, and even titles that were cancelled or never known about. It's updated regularly and is easily searchable, and all adds up to many a good afternoon of curious browsing.

Site:
Unseen 64
URL:
www.unseen64.net



INTERVIEW

Batman begins

Developers are a cowardly and superstitious lot: we shall become a bat, and interrogate them

With a 70-year mythology, constant reinterpretations in all forms of media and worldwide appeal, it's fair to say that Batman's got character. He's lots of characters, in fact. It's unfortunate that videogames so often up end up with the bland, repetitive and poorly controlled one. *Arkham Asylum* (see p34) promises otherwise – but surely we've heard it all before? We speak to game director **Sefton Hill** and story and narrative designer **Paul Crocker** about their new spin on the caped crusader.

Where did you start with a character that seems to be reinvented every few years?
Sefton Hill: We concentrated on what was really important about the character and what we had to keep. I think that's where a lot of these games go wrong from the start: you get a property and then try and squeeze it into a game. And you'll lose all the things that don't fit through that genre shape. So if you look at those key things it's about who and what Batman is, the freedom of having a grapple, the power of the melee combat. He's not stealthy, there's more of a predator element to the way he hunts the villains. We took those elements and split the company into smaller teams to do each one successfully. Everything had to be good, and interesting. Then we put them together.
Paul Crocker: What we tried to do is make the kind of game that a Batman fan wants – it's as dark as we're allowed to be for a PG-13 game. There aren't a lot of good superhero games out there. There are the *Spider-Man* ones, I suppose, but... people think characters like this are easy to translate, and they're not at all. The visually iconic thing only goes so far. The *Superman* games prove that. We've spent a lot of time ensuring that you put the disc in and feel like Batman.

And what makes a player feel like Batman?
SH: Totally empowering them. We didn't want a *Batman* game where you started, came across two thugs, and they beat you up. That's not right. You have to feel immediately like Batman. So the controls are simple, but over the course of the game your understanding of the depth develops. You'll pick up stuff as you move through, there's





Paul Crocker (left) and Sefton Hill of Rocksteady Studios. Founded in 2004, the studio is best known for 2006's *Urban Chaos: Riot Response*. Crocker enjoyed an artistic moment in that title via the leader of the Burner Gang, who shared his name, and the team got their revenge with a memorable end in a meat grinder











The comics' Joker doesn't have a fixed personality, neatly explained away by the graphic novel Arkham Asylum as 'a form of super-sanity'

definitely an element of progression – there's going to be some much deadlier things in there we haven't shown yet.

But the stealth genre must also be an inspiration of sorts.

SH: In terms of inspirations that's a difficult one. I've never really liked stealth games. I was always frustrated with that thing where you start playing and you're just bumbling around. Then some guards see you and you hide behind a box, and after a minute they forget you. So we're thinking about a game that doesn't punish you, and lets you look and plan what you're going to do first.

"The Joker crops up all the way through, and there's usually a reason why Batman can't just sock him. The Joker is his greatest adversary"

The storyline revolves around the relationship between Batman and the Joker, something that has an exhaustive history in the comics.

PC: Personally I love The Killing Joke, that's like the archetypal Joker, but we're definitely not making a videogame based on The Killing Joke. We've got a dark, funny Joker, we've got Mark Hamill who's a great voice for him, and it's slightly weird in that maybe it's like a darker version of the cartoon. It's not a movie, it's the comics, and we like the graphic novel approach. The Joker crops up all the way through, and there's usually a reason why Batman can't just sock him. Batman is incredible, but the Joker is his greatest adversary.

SH: One of the big things is that everything feels like an extension of the Joker: even when he's not in the room you can feel his influence. We call it the Jokerfication of the asylum. Over the course of the story the asylum changes, so the location goes on a journey as well as the player.

Where did you get the look of Arkham Asylum from?

PC: From 70 years of history! We're in a place where things look dark and grimy and obviously that suits the Unreal engine – the combination of that with the gothic architecture makes it look the way it does. Some bits are from the Arkham Asylum graphic novel of course, like the scarabs in the railings, but also there's stuff that's just about what feels right.



Any nuclear submarines purchased by PN Gwynne hidden away in there?

PC: One thing we were very conscious we didn't want to do was have Joker in a helicopter, flying around and dropping bombs on you. Joker doesn't make a very good boss character. Apart from that kind of silly stuff, the game has everything – apart from Bat-Mite!



INTERVIEW

Shooter school

How 'the YouTube for Flash games' turned to teaching

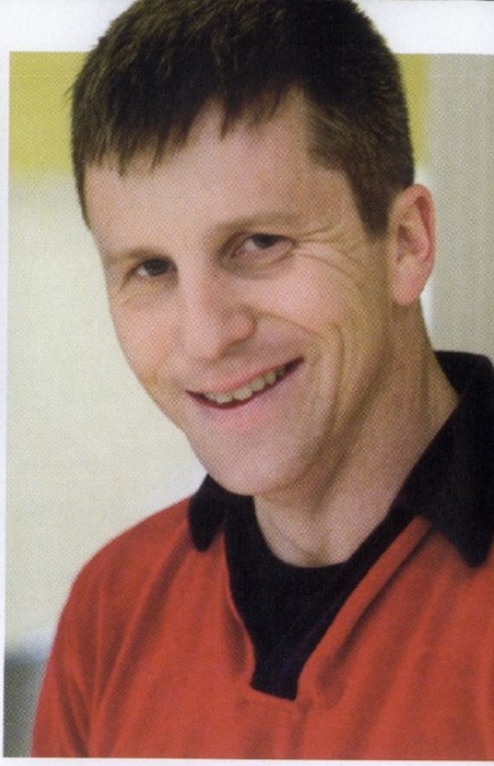
Having recently passed 8,000 uploaded games since its launch in March 2007, Flash game site Kongregate has opened Labs, a new section devoted to tutoring novices in how to make games in Flash. The site has done much to promote and support the scene, giving its members a share of ad revenue – a game attracting a not-terribly-popular 100,000 plays is estimated to net around $100 – and the chance to win money in game creation contests. We spoke to founder **Jim Greer** about Labs, how the site and scene have developed since Kongregate opened, and what Flash's future has in store.

Have the first 18 months gone as expected?
The direction the site has taken is what we were expecting, though we got to hosting 100 games in the time I expected we'd get to 20. I had no idea of the depth and hunger that developers would have to make games.

Other Flash game sites haven't yet copied Kongregrate's template – is that a surprise?
Yeah, I'm a little bit surprised, though to do that means extra technical work, managing the community, and getting developers to use your APIs [for its achievement system]. It's not trivial at all. Developers are also making money – some thousands or tens of thousands – from the ad revenue share and the contest prizes. The top few developers on the site are making a living, but we're trying to extend that so anyone with a popular game can make one. We've got some other things we're doing in that direction, like microtransactions and multiplayer hosting.







Future tutorials will address how to implement forthcoming features such as microtransactions, multiplayer and achievements. "We'll see how people respond and iterate from there," Greer (right) says

Many games on Kongregate are posted on other Flash game sites, too. How do you feel about that?
That's the nature of the web, that it's open. We have a deal where we sponsor *Desktop Tower Defense* on [creator] Paul Preece's site and we don't see that as a big threat. I want to give the existing portals a lot of respect. They've a whole load of great games and they've been around for a lot longer, but we're raising the bar on the deals the developers get. They're making a lot more money because of us. We're trying to do something a bit different and deeper, and offering multiplayer to any developer means that we will start to get different games than can exist on other portals. But, even then, it's never going to be the case that one portal will own Flash gaming.

> **"A couple of years ago a console gamer would have said that Flash games were garbage, but they realise now that there's a lot you can do in that small window"**

How has the Flash gaming scene changed since Kongregate launched?
The total audience has grown a lot because the appreciation of it has gotten more mainstream. A couple of years ago a console gamer would have said that Flash games were mostly garbage, but they realise now that there's a lot you can do in that small window. There are sites dedicated to reviewing them and a broader appreciation among developers that there's money to be made – though the scene is mostly people just wanting to make a game and get it in front of people.

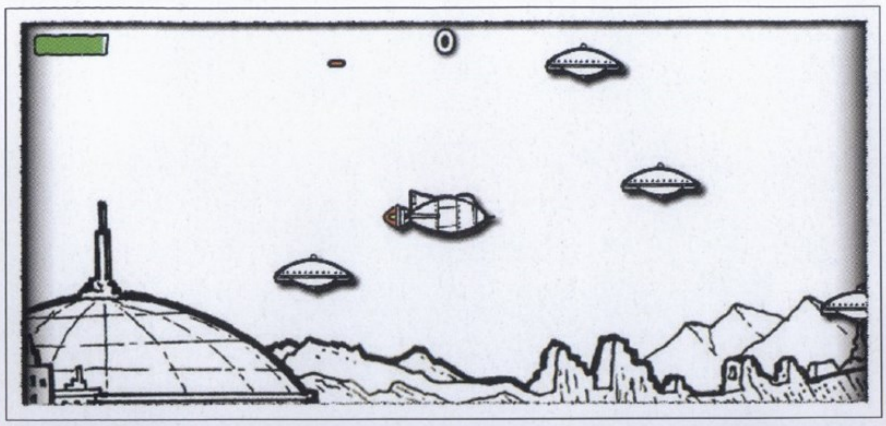
You used to work at EA – do you think there has been a change in perception in the mainstream game industry, too?
Of Flash games yes, but also of indie games more broadly as a phenomenon. When I was leaving EA I was talking with two other guys there about creating our own game studio, but I had this Kongregate idea, so we formed two companies and shared offices – well, an apartment. Those two guys were Ron and Kyle of 2D Boy, and *World Of Goo* is another step in raising the bar for indie games. We're riding a wave of the fact that the internet has meant that shelf space isn't a problem any more.

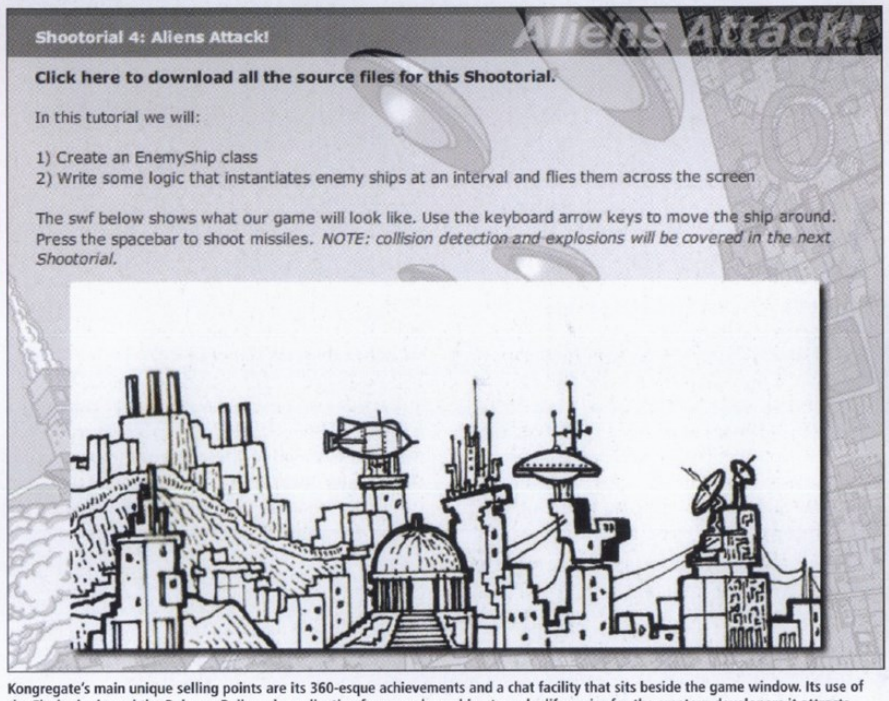
Was Kongregate Labs a part of the plan from the beginning?
We always wanted to have tools to help people to make games. I'm 37 and learned to program when my mum got me an Apple II. Then there were magazines with BASIC code to type in and I could hack around *Rogue* and use a hex editor to change the icons in *Ultima*, or whatever; stupid stuff, but it demystified what making a game was all about. That's just not true today. If you play something





Sonny (above), a simple turn-based RPG battler, is Kongregate's current number-one-played game, and was created by a 19-year-old arts student from London. *The Last Stand 2* (left), also very popular on the site, is a polished zombie survival shooter

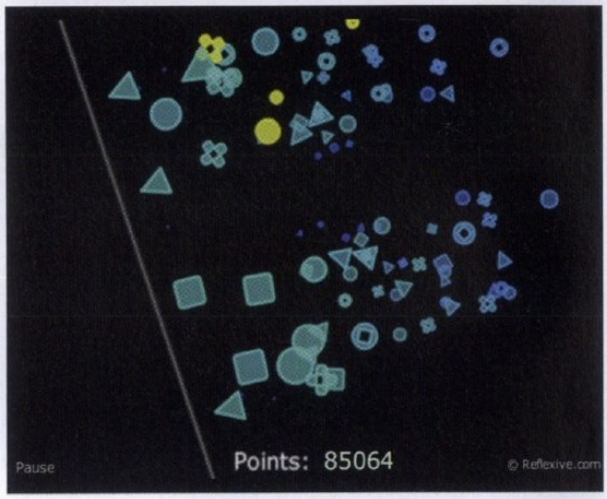




Kongregate's main unique selling points are its 360-esque achievements and a chat facility that sits beside the game window. Its use of the Flash plugin and the Ruby on Rails web application framework combine to make life easier for the amateur developers it attracts

Other popular Kongregate attractions in recent months have been *Straw Hat Samurai* (below) and *Music Catch* (bottom), which in its downloadable form allows you to use your own MP3s





like *GTA* or *Spore* they're so complex, and even the idea that they were made by people like you is kind of abstract. The thing about Flash is that of all the game creation tools it's one of the easiest, but it's still intimidating, so we've made nine tutorials on making a side-scrolling shooter, from how to download the 30-day free Flash trial to collision detection and AI. Basically, by the end you've created a game including all the source code, and then we have a contest for cash prizes for modifying it. People will be able to upload their own tutorials too, and we'll keep doing new sets for different genres.

Was there already an informal development community on Kongregate?
Yes, and it's pretty active, with programming and art forums. But the passage from playing a game to making one wasn't as easy as it could be. Most members have a latent interest in making games and we were getting a lot of questions about how you do that. Though there are some tools and tutorials around, there isn't anything we thought was done as well as it could be.

Have you had much support from Adobe? It doesn't appear to be working particularly hard in getting game developers to use Flash.
I think there's been a problem, but it's changing. It's easier to sell tools to enterprise companies for making shopping carts and they're trying to get it on mobiles. But the new Flash 10 has had a lot of work put into performance and some 3D acceleration, so they're coming around. We're talking to Adobe about providing free copies of Flash for contest winners. So we'll see.

With plugins like Silverlight and Unity3D, browser-based gaming seems to be an important part of PC gaming's future. Do you see yourselves as part of that movement?
Communities for making games on these new plugins are only just getting started, and there's a barrier around downloading the plugins, so they're not quite as lightweight as Flash. But I expect Kongregate to be around in ten years and I expect us to be making browser-based games. People live in their web browsers so you'd be crazy not to think that's part of gaming's future.

Newswire



Activision Blizzard dominates Joysticks

The 26th Annual Golden Joystick Awards in association with Virgin Media have been handed out. As always, the gong winners were decided by public vote, and recipients this year included *Super Smash Bros Brawl* (Nintendo Game of the Year), *GTAIV* (Arvato Xbox GOTY) and *MGS4* (PlayStation GOTY). Publisher of the Year was scooped by Activision Blizzard, while CVG.co.uk Developer of the Year went to Rockstar North. *Fallout 3*, meanwhile, was voted the winner in the Edge Most Wanted category. Finally, the biggies, and a clean sweep: both GamesRadar's Online GOTY and the Virgin Media Ultimate GOTY saw a triumph for *Call Of Duty 4*, rounding off a successful night for its publisher.





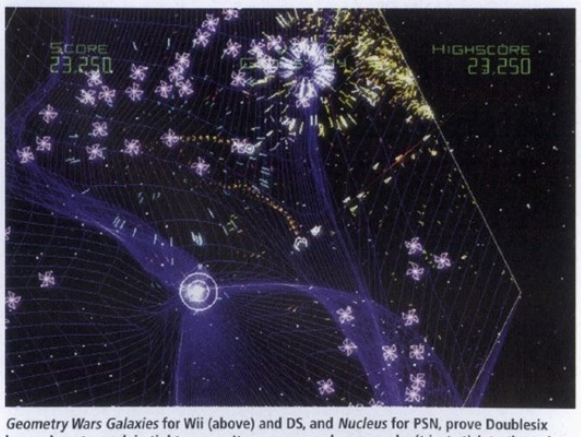
Small and simple

Why download specialist Doublesix refuses to think big despite the giant looming over its shoulder

When Kuju decided to rebrand its studios, each had to choose a focus. Guildford-based Doublesix, named after the dice roll giving you another go, chose digital downloads for console and PC. Having, prior to rebranding, previously produced boxed title *Geometry Wars Galaxies* for Wii, the first game under its new moniker will be *Burn, Zombie, Burn*, an arena-based score-attack shooter (see p50). With a South Park project kept tightly under wraps, creative director **Jim Mummery** tells us what comes next.

Are games like *Burn, Zombie, Burn* the means or the end?
It's our first game. For the next one, we'll probably do something that expands upon what we do, technically or however. For this one, we wanted something that suited where it was going – a digital download. It had to suit its audience, and sit in a place where we definitely had experience. While we do want to expand, we don't want to get big. The objective for Doublesix is to become the go-to place for digital downloads, part of which is for people to come to you with their IP and know they'll get something good out of it. It sounds like a very boring managerial response, but that's it.

"I'd like to think that small studios can now exist more easily than at the advent of the current gen. The team size we have now is what we used to have on PS1 or Saturn"



Geometry Wars Galaxies for Wii (above) and DS, and *Nucleus* for PSN, prove Doublesix knows how to work in tight spaces. Its new games, however, don't just stick to the twin-stick formula. Also on the cards is *South Park*, a collaboration with Comedy Central

What kinds of offers have you turned down?
We tend to turn down projects that studios like Zoë Mode, for example, would pick up. The mentality and culture of our studio bends a certain way, and certain games wouldn't sit comfortably with the people we have.

How precious is that kind of boutique development nowadays?
It's partly why Kuju rebranded the studios – everyone had to find a focus. The focuses are varied, obviously, not even title-based or platform-based or genre-based. But it gave us a place to start, and digital downloads are ideal for a smaller studio. And I guess the advent of XBLA and PSN means that you can be that bedroom coder type of place.

When you're a big company, you end up in a situation where you need to get a project signed, and you'll pitch a number of things and jump to whichever gets the interest. That's the random element. We'll probably make very different games but the philosophy and culture of the studio is continuity. I'd like to think that small studios can now exist much more easily than at the advent of the current gen. The team size we have now is what we used to have on PS1 or Saturn – and that's a good size for making things interesting.

But we've had cycles in the past where in order to survive you need to be putting out a big title. Digital download's not always going to be small games; suddenly, you're going to get things that are almost competing with AAA titles. And when those start edging into the market, are people still going to buy *Geometry Wars* and *Burn, Zombie, Burn*? I'd like to think so, but we'll see.

Will movie licences change the landscape?
The film stuff's interesting. We used to be sent scripts for things like Fortress 2 and Tank Girl, and these weren't huge movies. These days, games are made for the summer blockbusters. But you can also make a smaller game that looks next-gen and doesn't harm the impact of the movie. The same goes for smaller TV shows or toy lines. Whether you need to is another matter, but it does free up a place in the market.



Mummery insists the creative process at Doublesix is democratic, with any lover of games able and entitled to propose one. *Burn, Zombie, Burn* was suggested by studio head James Brooksby: he loved fire, he loved zombies – why not put them together?

How fair is the revenue structure for digital downloads now?
We're very pragmatic in terms of how we deal with it. We generally offer to work on a varying stream – so depending on who we're working for we might take something that's heavily royalty-based, where we share the cost of the product. Or we work for hire, which is something we can do because of the reduced costs. Each title has its own schemes for paying developers and publishers, and digital downloads certainly offer the most flexibility.

But there's always that risk of the younger studio taking on too much work...
I've seen it in every company I've worked for – you see these patterns of expansion and compression. Some companies are meant to expand; the problem's the speed of it. You need stability. As a digital download studio, though, we have to take on more and look for more as our project times are shorter. And even those aren't guaranteed. Look at the whole Vivendi and Blizzard thing – unforeseen things do happen. This is not a secure industry.

How much autonomy do you enjoy?
The corporate entity provides convenient aspects for its studios, and having the Kuju name is helpful. We're not really a virgin start-up that has to struggle. Kuju naturally has an interest in what its studios do, but that's mostly about the quality: whether you're marketing things right, whether the platform SKU is right, whether you're dealing with the publisher well. It doesn't affect the type of game we want to make.

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BOOK

Cabinet fever

From UFO Catchers to the retro sections, and everything in between, Brian Ashcraft embarks on an intriguing tour of Japanese arcades

The strengths and weaknesses of Arcade Mania! come from the same source. Read it for the story of Japanese arcades and you'll be disappointed. Read it to find out about videogames in Japanese arcades and you'll be half-disappointed. Arcade Mania! is a miscellaneous hodgepodge of Japanese arcade culture, wrapped up in an excitable title but with no overarching structure and entries that veer between the invigorating and the dull.

'Hey, man, relax', the book replies. The introduction reassures us that this is merely a 'tour guide, offering a window into the arcades' rather than a boring old 'history book'. By placing chapters in the order you would encounter machines such as UFO Catchers, card games, shooters and rhythm games in an arcade, Arcade Mania! will bring 'the Japanese arcade experience to you the reader wherever you are'. But its conjuring of the regular staples of salarymen, giggling schoolgirls and overflowing ashtrays make it clear that few preconceptions will be challenged here.

Perhaps, though, this is for the best. Arcade Mania! is more of a brief introduction to Japanese arcades written for people who haven't ever seen one than an in-depth examination of the 'world of Japan's game centers'. And Ashcraft is a committed and entertaining host, with access to interesting individuals and a keen eye for the trends that dominate these arcades' floors. The book is at its best when describing phenomena such as Purikura, sticker-booth machines that print handbag-friendly sheets of glossy pictures with various embellishments – some user-defined, some software-enhanced. Though such tech has also been seen in the west, Purikura caused a craze among teenage girls in Japan, described entertainingly here alongside fascinating offshoots such as Business Purikura machines which, in turn, led to Pierimo, a system that uses 28 cameras to create keychain busts of users.

Ashcraft is a committed and entertaining host, with access to interesting individuals and a keen eye for the trends that dominate the floors

It's when it focuses on videogames that Arcade Mania! is at its weakest. Ashcraft's conclusions have a tendency to be pat, such as when writing about rhythm games: '"We're lucky to have games that inspire physical action," says Aaron [a *DDR* player], wiping his brow. Yes, yes we are'. On other occasions he veers into territory that feels plain rash: 'Card-based games represent the future for arcade games'. There's also an oddly non-celebratory tone that sometimes creeps in to spell out that videogames are a waste of time: 'What does [*Street Fighter* expert Daigo 'the Beast' Umehara] have for the thousands of dollars he sunk in Tokyo arcades? Apart from being really good at *Street Fighter*... nothing."

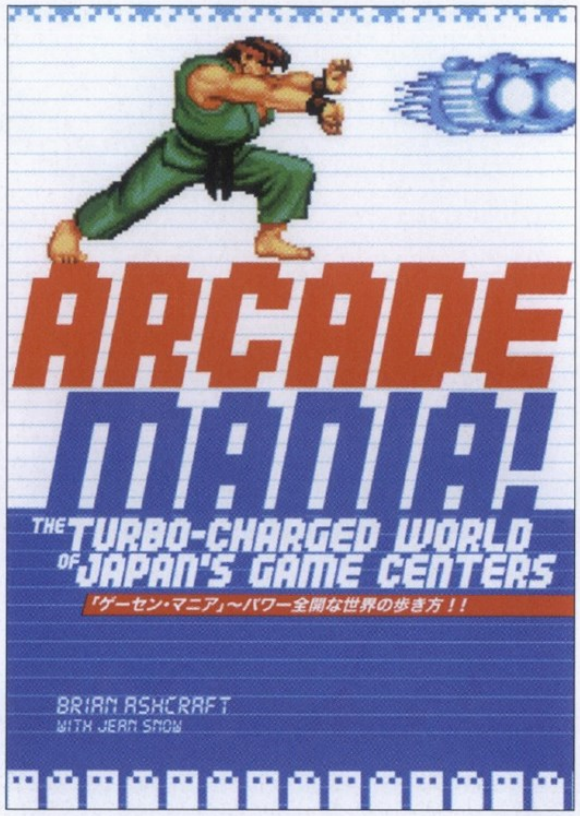
Pernickety readers will take issue with some of Ashcraft's other observations, including his assertion that 'for the *Donkey Kong* sequel, Jumpman would be renamed Mario'. (Didn't Jumpman become Mario for *Donkey Kong*'s American release thanks to a piece of opportunism on the part of Minoru Arakawa, then-president of Nintendo Of America? That is, at least, how the story has been told for many years.)

The book's style can also become tiresome, crammed as it is with exclamations, weird contractions and rat-a-tat particles that often dismiss questions of potential interest. 'Think fishing is exciting? It's not!' 'Did it matter if [*Afterburner*] was repetitive? Course not, it had 'splosions!' 'It's hard to believe [*Ikaruga*] was created by a four-man team. Tiny!' Charming at first, it's a style that rapidly begins to pall.

Despite this, Arcade Mania! contains enough intriguing side-streets and offbeat interviews to be worth persevering with. Many readers will deem it unambitious, and there are no profound insights to be had, but it injects a little life into the areas it covers, and the genial nature suits some of its subjects well. It's no 'greatest hits' of the Japanese arcades, then, but it passes muster as a decent compilation work.



The design is accomplished but unconventional, flipping between colour and black-and-white apparently at random. It often fails to acknowledge the text: the fighting chapter, for example, features concept art from *SFIV*, which is barely mentioned, perhaps because Capcom's game wasn't released at the time of writing



Author:
Brian Ashcraft (with Jean Snow)
Publisher:
Kodansha Europe Limited

Continue

The Cole Train
Wooooooooooooooooo! Mama told me not to die!

NXE
Like a new console for free, and installs work wonders

***LBP*'s Play and Create**
How to get non-gamers interested in your PS3

Quit

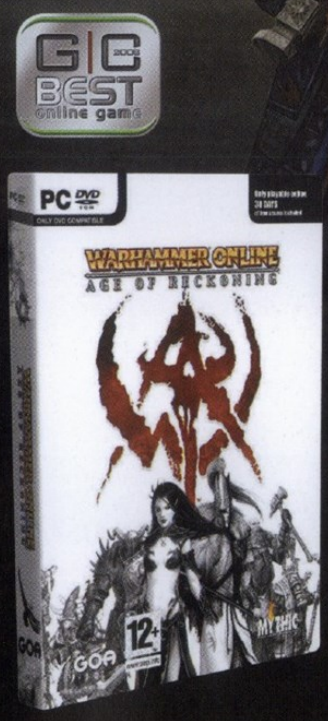
***LBP*'s Share**
Yes, that last bit wasn't quite so easy, was it?

***LBP* level theft**
Possibly the dirtiest thing on the internet this year

Gaming night time
The only good thing about it is sunrise

War is everywhere

750.000 players
have already chosen their side



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INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Burnout Paradise

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** EA



What's this? Criterion asking us to pay for DLC? Well, the free ride couldn't last forever. First up for download is a fairy-cake-coloured Party Mode in February, also bundled in a new retail pack

50 Cent: Blood On The Sand

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** THQ



Says new publisher THQ of the Swordfish-developed shooter: 'Intense singleplayer combat, online co-op and never-before-released music tracks make this the ultimate package…'

R-Type Dimensions

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT



The souped-up modes look better in motion, the classic modes feel authentic, and the expansion to full 16:9 is a convincing one. In other words, an excellent update of the first two games

Halo 3: Recon

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT



Finish the fight! Resume the fight! Make up your mind, Bungie. In fairness, this new campaign occurs before the events of *Halo 3*, adding a new character, multiplayer maps and Forge options

Cartoon Network Universe: FusionFall

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** TIME WARNER



You have to admire this kids' MMO. Its switch to the Unity engine means it runs in most browsers, the rich CN universe moderated by CrispThinking's child-friendly filters. A closed beta is underway

Riddick: Assault On Dark Athena

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** ATARI



The former expansion officially becomes a complete package, though hopefully the multiplayer modes won't compromise the campaign. Visuals strike the expected balance of old and new

Zombies!!!

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT/SCEE



The dead will rise – at least when it comes to downloadable titles based on cult boardgames. Unfazed by the demise of its Talisman adaptation, Big Rooster takes on Twilight Creations' tile romp

Legend Of Ys: Books I & II

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** ATLUS



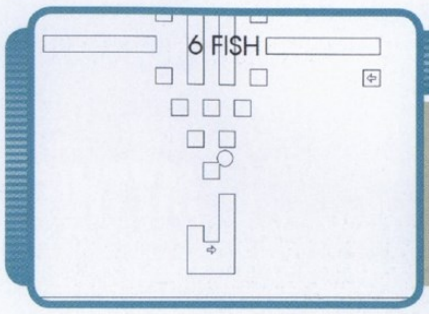
Possibly the most cynical press release ever describes 'new features to immediately post about in message boards' and a chance 'to condescend the next generation of gamers'. Right

Gray Matter

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** DTP



Despite a change of developer back in April, Jane Jensen's magic-versus-science adventure game soldiers on. The author herself explains all in a new blog: blog.graymatter-game.com



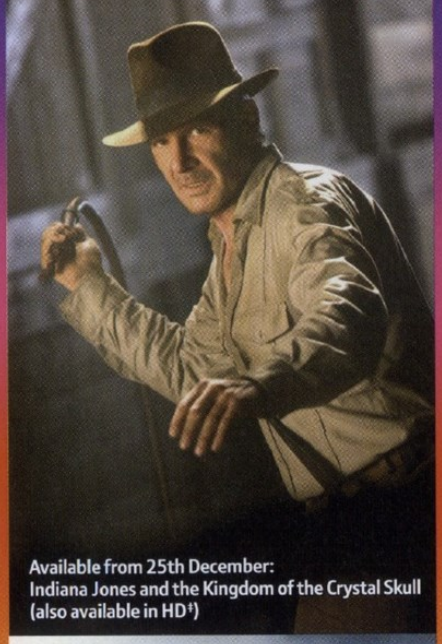
❑ INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Innoquous tinyurl.com/5gemlr

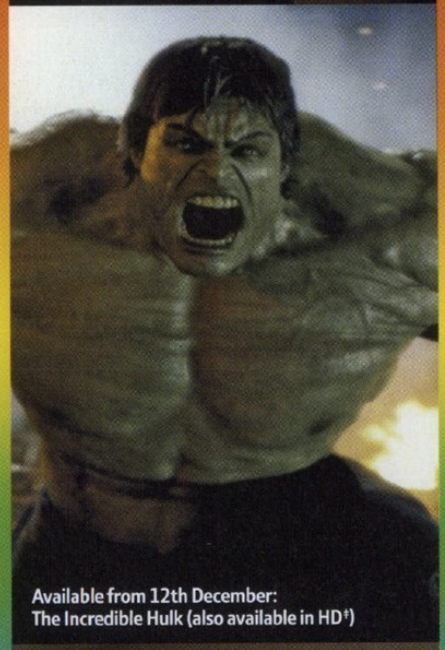
Innoquous is a short platformer, built around a gravity-flipping mechanic that lets you spin your surroundings. The first level (of ten) is rather perfunctory, but following this arrow switches are introduced that have to be touched, or avoided, by your ball to be activated. Depending on their alignment and your planning, you could be flying towards the exit or restarting. Or falling on to a platform made in the shape of a 'LOL' to mark your error.

Special mention has to go to the Latino-style music that plays throughout, some of the finest jaunty beats heard in any indie game. *Innoquous* only falls down once or twice, when the temptation to use its mechanic as an ongoing rollercoaster ride with no player involvement wins out and you're left staring idly at the monitor for half a minute, but these moments are relatively rare.

The clever applications of its simple stylings and central idea, along with the fact that it doesn't outstay its welcome, make this well worth the free download.



Available from 25th December:
Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull
(also available in HD†)



Available from 12th December:
The Incredible Hulk (also available in HD†)



Available from 11th December: Iron Man
(also available in HD†)

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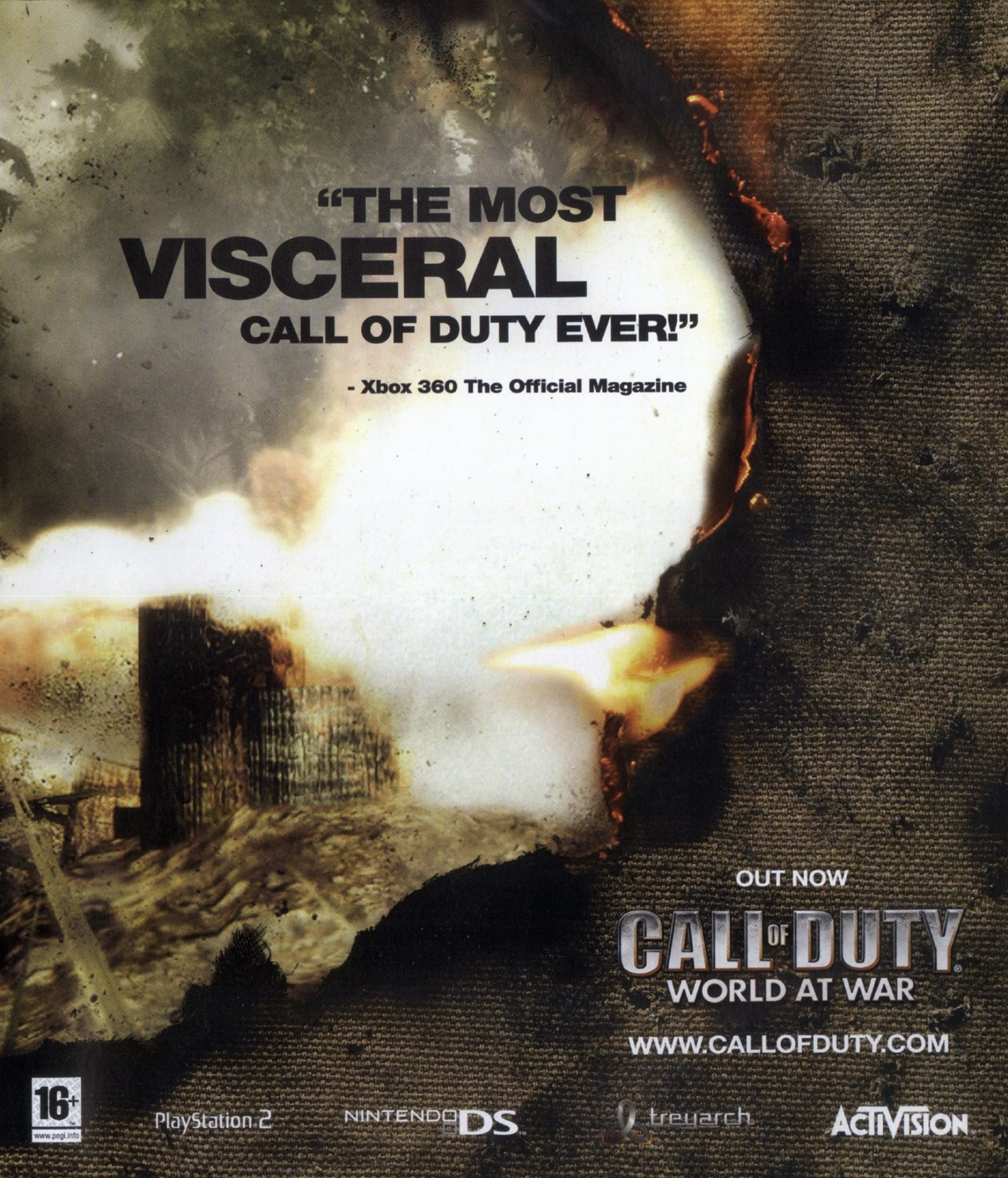
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15
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In association with Screen Digest

Music for the masses

Screen Digest analyst Piers Harding-Rolls examines console game trends over the Christmas quarter

Despite concerns over the wider economic situation, the games industry is gearing up for the biggest Christmas of the current home console generation. The combined global installed base of Wii, Xbox 360 and PS3 by calendar year end is likely to be just under 90m units, and publishers have responded with a slew of releases. Many of these titles are based on publishers' most established franchises, while others are the second instalments of original IP titles made specifically for this generation of consoles.

Activision Blizzard is asserting its size and strength on the marketplace with the largest release slate for the key Christmas period, with around 35 releases compared with 25 from EA and 20 from Ubisoft. Similar to the last quarter, releases are being heavily concentrated amongst the biggest publishers, with the five busiest in the quarter accounting for around 60 per cent of all packaged releases for Wii, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3.

Comparing genre splits for all 2007 and 2008 releases reveals a continued surge in minigame compilations, especially for Wii, and the arrival of a whole gamut of music games prompted by the stellar success of *Guitar Hero, Rock Band* and *SingStar*. By the end of 2008, we will have seen almost 40 releases of games based on the music and minigame genres, compared with 14 music and ten minigame releases in 2007.

Music games offer a fast growing opportunity to publishers seeking to build their business, yet already the sector appears somewhat crowded. This suggests that those titles with the biggest brand, or licensed IP that is recognisable to the consumer, are likely to be better placed to compete. *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* are now well-established brands, and breaking their hold on the market will be a challenge for new entrants.

These two franchises have undoubtedly driven a revolution in gaming, generating impressive growth in a vitally important genre for which peripherals, essential to gameplay, also enhance publisher and retailer margins. The *Guitar Hero* franchise has sold



The *Guitar Hero* (see *World Tour* review on p96) and *Rock Band* juggernaut (or tour bus) continues to rumble on, having seen release on most home consoles, DS, PC, Macintosh and mobile phones





Wii Music **(see interview with creator Shigeru Miyamoto, p58) could yet be a force to be reckoned with in music games**

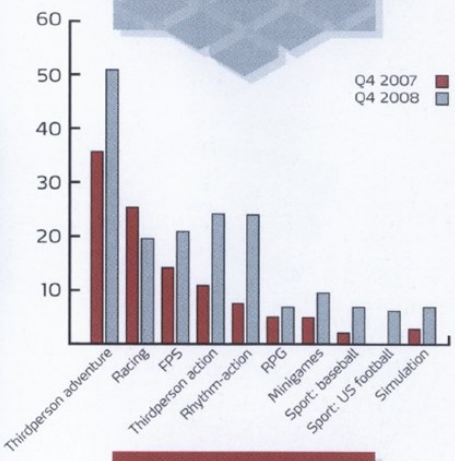
in excess of 21m units across all platforms, of which around 5m units of *Guitar Hero 3* and 2m units of *Guitar Hero 2* are on platforms that support the download of additional music tracks to the game. This total will rise sharply again by the end of 2008 with the release of *Guitar Hero World Tour*.

Guitar Hero and _Rock Band_ have undoubtedly driven a revolution in gaming, generating impressive growth in a vitally important genre for which peripherals also enhance margins

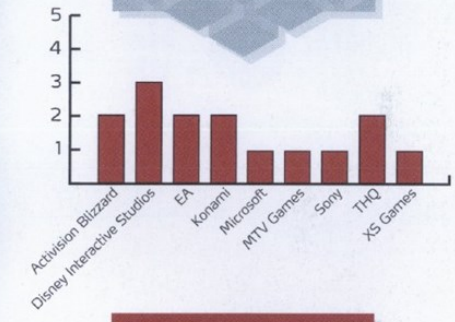
The other leading console music IP, Harmonix's *Rock Band*, has generated around 4m sales between two multiplatform iterations, the second of which has only just been released in the US. Screen Digest estimates that *Rock Band* has driven sales of over 21m paid music track downloads, while *Guitar Hero* gamers have bought around 18.5m. Screen Digest sees considerable further sales growth for downloadable music in games, given that downloadable content will be available for *Rock Band 2* (for the Wii) and *Guitar Hero World Tour* for the first time this Christmas.

A quick look at licensing trends for Q4 releases shows that the worlds of sport and TV provide the most regular source of non-game licences to the games industry this Christmas. In comparison, there was only one release based on a TV show licence in the last quarter. Holiday season shoppers are more likely to be swayed by well-known licences from these sectors, while this also shows that the console cycle is entering a stage of greater massmarket adoption, which fits well with games based on this type of IP. EA's hefty output of licensed sports games and Activision Blizzard's more movie-oriented licensed output will see them releasing around 14 and 13 licensed games respectively.

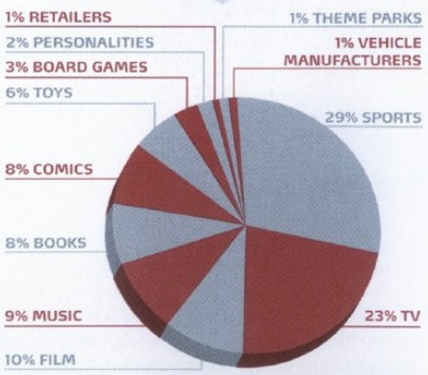
The top ten console genres by volume of releases



Q4 2008 console music game releases by publisher



Q4 2008's console game licensing trends



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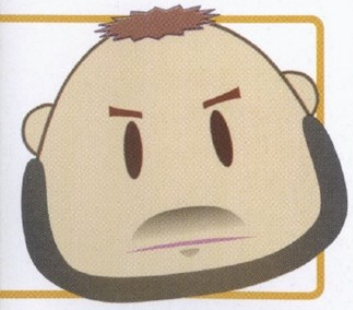


SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

Joker in the pack

Brick Bardo loves custard pies, but worries the industry's heading for an entirely avoidable banana skin



Recently I've been enjoying lots of those old silent slapstick comedies. I started with the greats like Chaplin, Keaton and Lloyd, but now I watch whatever I can get my hands on: Laurel & Hardy, the Keystone Cops, Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle, Charley Chase, Harry Langdon and Charles Bowers. The quality's uneven – some are great, others less so. But one thing they all share is that they're complete in what I would call an artistic sense. That is, the story and action blend together, the narrative's complete, and the genre already has its little trademarks. These films are from the 1910s and 1920s, and I'd always had some half-formed thought they would be experimental. I was wrong. These people had already invented the language of film comedy 80 to 90 years ago, which is pretty amazing.

And, at the same time, I feel very envious about the approach people in the west have to their culture. I can watch these very old classic movies easily. I don't have to be a member of some exclusive movie club, I just need to go to shop and buy them – the price is incredibly low, too. Today's young people may not be bothered by old movies, but they have the chance to see them whenever they want. Now, here's something about Japan: this situation is inconceivable over here. Toshiro Mifune, for example, is well known outside Japan. What about his movies, of which there are well over 150? It is easy to get the ones he made with Kurosawa. Anything less famous than that, you haven't got a chance – you could probably find between 40 to 50 of his movies, but that's all. So, if the director or producer is famous enough, a movie will survive, but the work of actors and less famous directors are seen as almost irrelevant.

The history of the videogame is still recent. People still remember most games, and closets still bulge with yellow Super Famicoms. But I really think the industry needs to create an institution to save our videogames

Japan is a country which has quite a strange, and almost cold, attitude when it comes to entertainment, and especially what you might call subculture or 'cult' classics. There's no systematic stance, however, but a very blurry line. Someone like Akira Kurosawa, a creator who's famous worldwide and therefore could never be pigeonholed as 'cult', can be found everywhere. The great directors, like Yasujiro Ozu or Kenji Mizoguchi, are well respected and easy to find. But there's no comparable respect for the actor's craft.

Known as Japan's 'God of Comedy' for a long time, Torajiro Saito directed around 70 movies but only around ten of them have been transferred on to DVD. There isn't much value placed on these movies (they're only comedies, right?), so the masters are scattered and, in some cases, lost entirely. If you don't have the master, there is no way you can have copies made. Isn't it a tragedy that films made only 50 or 60 years ago are now



lost forever? That's why I'm so envious about the western attitude to culture, and those rows of cheap DVDs of the silent black-and-white movies.

My worry is that the same could happen to historically important games if we don't, as an industry, act to safeguard our heritage. The history of the videogame is still recent compared to the movie industry. For that reason, people still remember most games, and closets still bulge with yellow Super Famicoms. But time is treacherous. People might now say, "There was such a game as this," but in a few short years this will turn into, "Was there really such a game?" and even further down the line into, "What is this ugly old game?" It is urgent that we get organised. I really think the industry needs to create an institution to save our videogames, hardware and software alike.

At the developer I used to work for, we had established a storage location for all our games, a kind of private museum. But the management didn't focus on it and stopped caring, and now many of those things are scattered and lost. I remember that on some occasions employees were asked if they could donate a copy of an old company game if they still had it, but the company didn't bother to gather many.

I know some institutions are trying to do similar things, but this would have to be its own place. I would love to see a museum of gaming being built. It would be open to the public, with rows and walls of games and hardware presented, and even a space you could enjoy them as the creators intended. But it would be a difficult thing to get going. In a perfect world the big platform holders, past and present, would have already put aside their differences to contribute to such a project: Nintendo, Sega, Sony, NEC, Microsoft, I'm looking you right in the eye. Each should donate their hardware, replacement parts, and each game they license for release, which would be the only way to guarantee a comprehensive collection. The more time passes, the more likely the games that can be saved will be fewer, and I fear we have already reached the stage where one or two pieces of our heritage are lost forever.





Weekly Famitsu (Enterbrain) Japanese sales: October 13–19

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales

1. ***Wii Music*** (Nintendo, Wii): 98,865 (NE)
2. ***Pokémon Platinum*** (Pokémon Company, DS): 63,104 (1,745,815)
3. ***Yushanokuseni Namaikida Or2*** (SCE, PSP): 62,224 (NE)
4. ***Culdcept DS*** (Sega, DS): 50,468 (NE)
5. ***Rhythm Tengoku Gold*** (Nintendo, DS): 40,568 (930,571)
6. ***Gundam 00 Gundam Meisters*** (BNG, PS2): 39,890 (NE)
7. ***Macross Frontier*** (BNG, PSP): 25,769 (123,234)
8. ***Shin Sangoku Musou 5 Special*** (Koei, PS2): 24,309 (182,173)
9. ***Wii Fit*** (Nintendo, Wii): 16,147 (2,653,931)
10. ***Mario Kart Wii*** (Nintendo, Wii): 11,220 (1,777,954)

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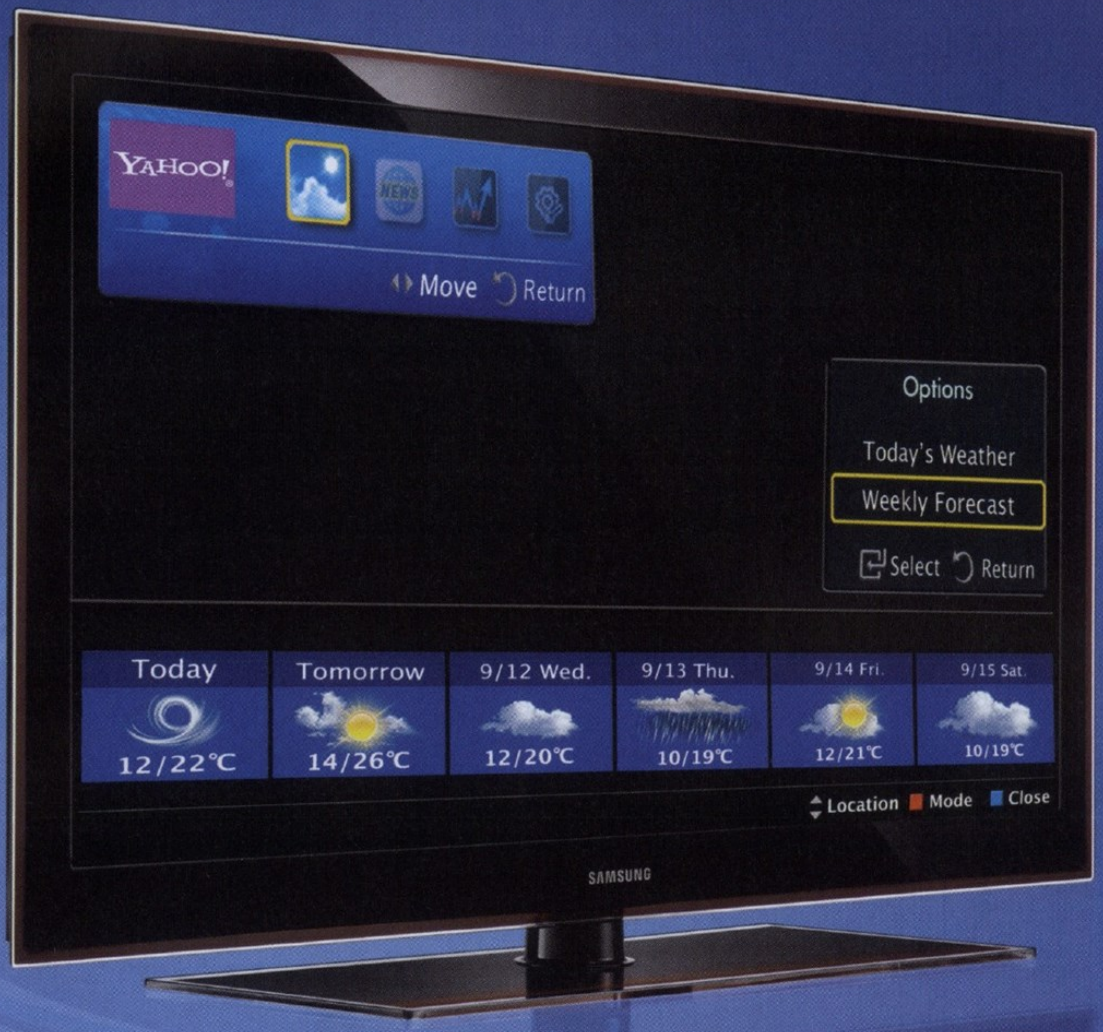
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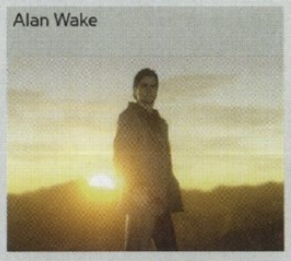
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Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Alan Wake



A sprinkle of precious new screenshots and Remedy's air of confidence during our recent trip has reignited our curiosity. Let's hope a film isn't in the offing.
360, MICROSOFT

Punch-Out!!



A one-two months in a row for Nintendo's uppercut to the glass jaw of boxing games. After years of sweat-pore sims we can't wait to give Gabby Jay another smack.
WII, NINTENDO

Street Fighter IV



It'll be hitting consoles in February, and our neglected Hori sticks are being dusted down in anticipation. Cammy and her ilk are back in. Let us get it on, no?
360, PS3, CAPCOM

Like it or lump it

Do games really need to excuse their mechanics?



We are already familiar with gaming's conventions, save points and a certain degree of linearity being two common traits. Does finding ways to dress them up within a game's fiction, as *Eat Lead* does, really serve a useful purpose?

Gamers are experienced in the art of suspending disbelief. Back in the days when the slavering nightmare creatures of Hell were represented by 56-pixel-tall sprites, you naturally had to use a bit of imagination to cover for the tech's limitations. Memory restrictions meant corpses disappeared, either blinking out of existence or sinking through the floor – but this little bruised the players' willingness to believe in those worlds. Similarly, we have been happy to indulge the level of abstraction represented by HUDs and inventory screens, and never begrudged that the need to save exists outside the narrative (although ponderous loading screens may break the spell).

All these things are or have been part of the necessary framework of gaming in much the same way that the fiction found in books is delivered by the inconvenience of ink on paper, rather than having word-thoughts projected directly into the brain. But as games' graphical fidelity has shot up, developers have looked again at such features and wondered if they can be denied or disguised. *BioShock* gives us many examples of this, explaining its rigid linearity through a story of mind-control, its save system through cloning. *Eat Lead: The Return Of Matt Hazard* makes its adherence to gaming cliché a fact by acknowledging that you are a character inside a game: bodies 'de-res', locations and enemies fall into line with convention.

The question is, who do they think they're kidding? Finding fictional excuses does little to mask devices we have seen countless times before. Do we really need a metaphor for the saved game to exist within the game's world? And if *BioShock* made an effort to point out how illusory player choice was, couldn't it have then eschewed it?

Under the guise of introspection we see the same clichés and crutches, now supposedly made acceptable with a nudge and a wink. Maybe developers should be looking to exceed the audience's expectations – if the linearity of so many games is a poor compromise between interactivity and narrative, then it must be possible to find something better, or else embrace gaming's traits without cynicism. Explicit self-awareness is only worthwhile if it exposes ways to transcend – otherwise it's just naval-gazing.

34 **Batman: Arkham Asylum**
360, PC, PS3

36 **Big Bang Mini**
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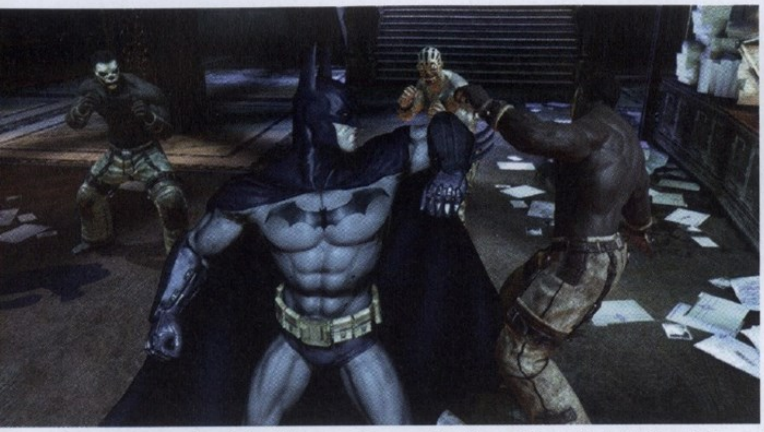
50 **Eat Lead: The Return Of Matt Hazard**
360, PS3

50 **Burn, Zombie, Burn**
PS3

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2009**

Batman: Arkham Asylum

Bruce Wayne ignores recommended visiting hours in the game that puts the psycho in psychoanalysis









The game centres on the relationship between Batman and the Joker, and there exist plenty of excellent sources in that particular area. Alan Moore's The Killing Joke was referenced during our time with Rocksteady

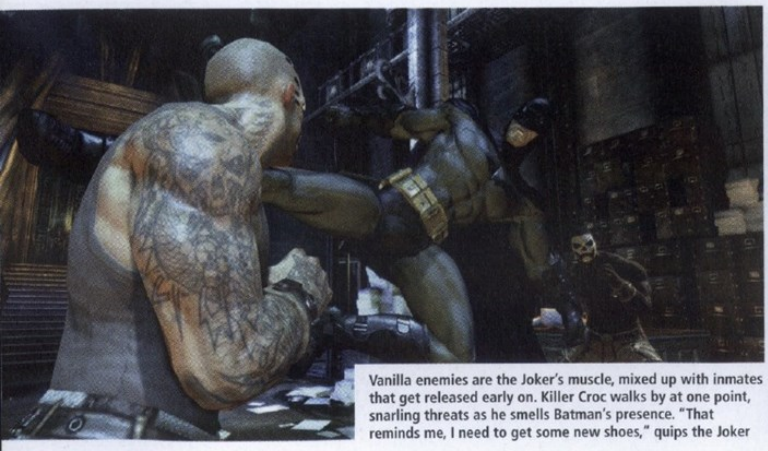
There are no great superhero games. Even those that have stood up to some scrutiny compromise their source, cramming powers and villains into well-worn gaming templates. It's the result of a rushed licence, a studio ordered to have a game ready to ship alongside the latest summer movie blockbuster. Or it can be the result of a simple act of opportunism, reskinning a standard genre piece in the knowledge that a captive audience will hand over the cash so long as it looks cool.

Batman: Arkham Asylum may yet turn out to be a bad game, but if it does it'll be for neither of those reasons. And there's a more than good chance it'll be an excellent one, because from concept to tone this is a seriously positive case for the genre.

It begins as the Batmobile, complete with a glorious 1950s grille, roars through Gotham, past emergency vehicles heading the other way. It's dark, it's raining, and the Joker is trussed up in the passenger seat. Arriving at Arkham in order to take him back into custody, Batman slowly walks down to the basement, the Joker alongside and bound to a gurney. Doctors, police and the occasional inmate stand on the periphery of this weird forward march. Lifts clank and grudgingly creak downwards, lights fritz on and off, and the security guards are jumpy. The lights go down. 'Here it is', you think, 'the Joker's going to escape'. The lights go back on, and Batman has the Joker gripped around the throat. "You're not going anywhere," he growls. "What, you don't trust me?" splutters the Joker in response.

This moment is when you begin to suspect there's a little more to *Arkham Asylum* than the usual licence-with-awesome-graphics. It's got atmosphere, sure, but it's also got attitude. That helps visually because, although its prettiness screams Unreal Engine 3, the comically exaggerated features and torsos give a comic-book overtone to otherwise moody hyper-realism. It's a balancing act that the game as a whole is keen on – as the Batmobile whooshes past the sign to Arkham in the opening, a small notice underneath warns that 'hitchhikers may be inmates'. Wandering through the levels, there are a few rats lying in a duct (Ratcatcher), an umbrella in a glass case (Penguin), some henchmen talk fearfully about what Zsasz might be up to, and a few 'Vote Dent' posters hang on the walls. This may not be the high-camp Batman, but there's a self-referentiality that takes it beyond being mere grim'n'gritty fare.

The Batmobile, complete with a glorious 1950s grille, roars past emergency vehicles heading the other way. It's dark, raining, and the Joker is trussed up in the passenger seat

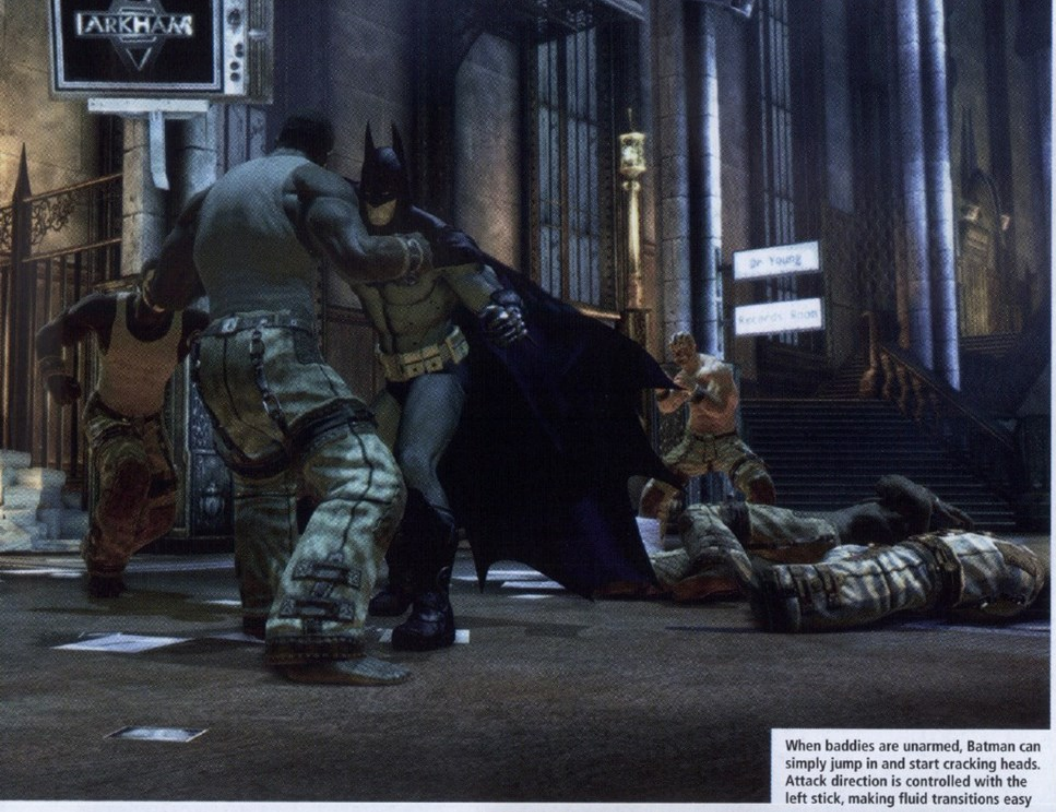






Vanilla enemies are the Joker's muscle, mixed up with inmates that get released early on. Killer Croc walks by at one point, snarling threats as he smells Batman's presence. "That reminds me, I need to get some new shoes," quips the Joker

Instead, the unflinching inspiration for Rocksteady's envisaging of Batman is the word 'superhero'. The game doesn't feel the need to avoid the fact that he's a hardcase. Taking out street thugs should be embarrassingly easy for the caped crusader, and it is. In one section two henchmen chat while guarding a staircase, with Batman perched above them. Targeting one with the



When baddies are unarmed, Batman can simply jump in and start cracking heads. Attack direction is controlled with the left stick, making fluid transitions easy





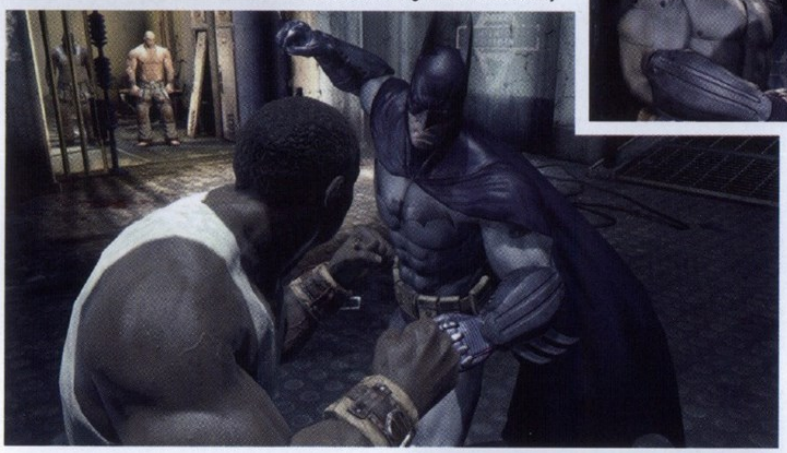


Good old Unreal Engine 3: Commissioner Gordon looks like he's been on the steroids. There are a lot of security staff and doctors caught up in the mess for Batman to help out

reticule, a single button prompt for a diving kick appears. Batman swoops down, cape spread, the camera flicks to the thug as he begins to raise his gun, and there's a second of slow-motion as foot connects with jaw. Landing, the other is dispatched with the merciless efficiency of a few button presses. They really didn't have a chance.

Empowering the player to such a degree is a bold move, and one that hasn't really been attempted in a licensed superhero game. Every one of the Incredible, Invincible, Super and Spider-men have faced foot soldiers that can take button mashings from comet-shattering fists. There are inherent advantages to taking this approach with Batman: he's human rather than superhuman, which stops things getting incongruous, and means a weakness to guns and knives is real. So you can take down any normal baddie easily, but running at one holding a machine gun is suicide. The flipside of your close-combat abilities is the need to silently and efficiently get close to enemies before you use them.

Rocksteady has been keen to avoid the stealth label for these moments, preferring to be lexically rapacious with 'predatory'. There is a distinction, though, in the way Batman moves around an environment compared to Solid Snake. Rather than creeping and peeking, he swings across roof beams, lands silently on outcrops, and shoots grapples to move almost instantly from one location to another. Rather than observing enemy positions for a gap, he's watching for when they're spread out and isolated. You're still looking for weaknesses and exploiting them, however, so regardless of how you want to describe these sections they retain the quiet thrill of using patterns to your advantage.



This is shown as Sefton Hill, the game's director, takes on six henchmen. He sticks to the shadows and the roof, waiting for an opening. When Batman strikes at one of the group, quickly incapacitating him and returning to the shadows in a single fluid move, *Arkham Asylum* shows one of its most greatest flourishes. The others are alarmed. "Is it Batman?" "Is he here?" Only the most humourless observer won't grin. The thugs, armed with handguns, regain their composure, and over the next few minutes Batman moves silently around the room, waiting for each of the five remaining thugs to make a mistake. When they do, they're down. When there are only three left, they panic further, but move in a tight triangular formation that makes attacking difficult. One separates away and goes down. The last two



really panic, firing blindly, fearfully glancing at each other, but becoming wilder in their movements. It's almost too easy.

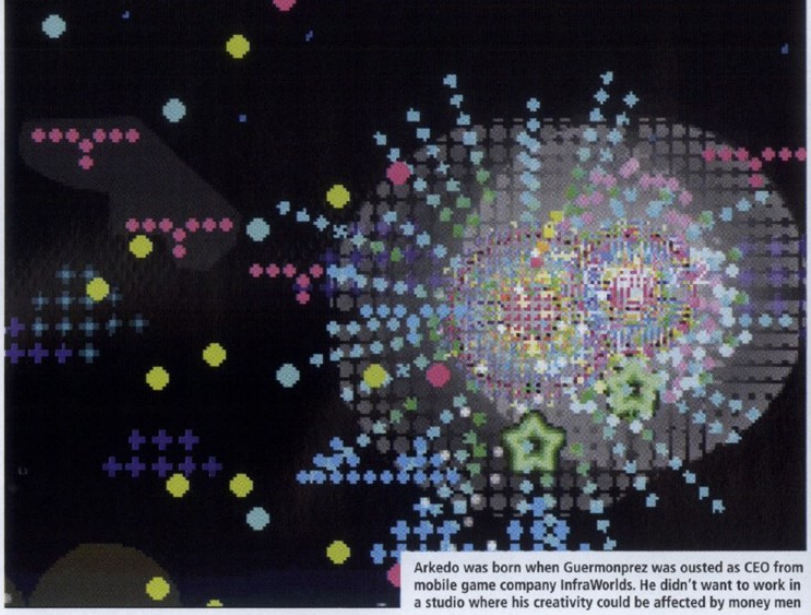
Well, for Batman it is, anyway. Easy doesn't necessarily mean simple: the opportunity has to be created before the biff-bam action. It's about making a Batman game feel like you're controlling Batman, using the licence to inform the core of the game rather than wrapping it around common mechanics. Rocksteady handles all of this convincingly.



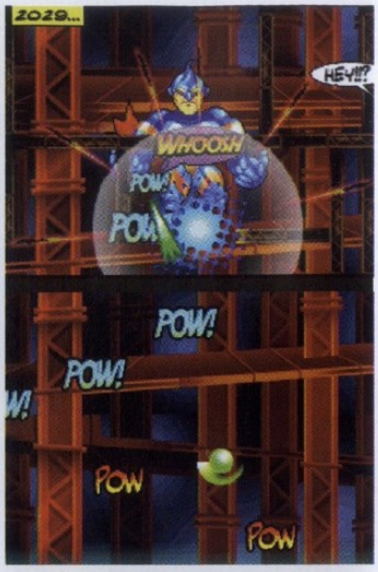
And where is the Batscan?

One example of *Arkham Asylum*'s detective element sees Batman looking for papers in a scientist's office. Turning on the security camera shows the occupant removing them from a wall safe; scanning the safe shows their fingerprints; analysing these lets Batman, through the magic of Batscan technology, see those same fingerprints wherever they occur. Staying in blue 'scan' mode, they can be followed throughout the level, with a few detours to demolish a clutch of clueless baddies. It's not complicated, but nor is it simply following a guide arrow, and should be a relaxing counterpoint to the creeping and thwacking that characterise the rest of the game.





Arkedo was born when Guermonprez was ousted as CEO from mobile game company InfraWorlds. He didn't want to work in a studio where his creativity could be affected by money men



FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **SOUTHPEAK**
DEVELOPER: **ARKEDO**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **2009**

Big Bang Mini

Arkedo has a blast at creating something that's small and perfectly formed

Camille Guermonprez, founder of Arkedo, tells us he's been hoping to sell his own brand of olive oil, pressed from the tree that sits in among the cables and monitors of the developer's Parisian studio. There's no doubting that Arkedo has an unusual set-up. The four-strong team lives from game to game, keeps its own IP, never calls meetings, and eats together every Friday, when gourmet Guermonprez prepares food for the other staff from the restaurant-standard kitchen nestled in the office's corner. The team's last project, *Nervous Brickdown*, was a well-received twist on the *Breakout* formula, and its latest, *Big Bang Mini*, follows suit, taking on the shooter with energy and humour.

The basic action of *Big Bang Mini* does little to suggest its addictive properties. The player shoots fireworks from lower to upper screen by sweeping the stylus in the desired direction. The aim is to destroy enemies and collect the stars that consequently rain down with a ball on the lower screen – effectively your ship, in shooter terminology – dragging it about with the stylus to grab pick-ups and avoid enemies' return fire. This creates a tension between shooting and manoeuvring your ship to safety that is the game's core source of frenetic action. Fireworks which miss their target explode at the top of the screen, raining down debris which adds to the bullet hell already threatening your craft. Things get more complicated as further variables are introduced – clouds which reflect shots back at you, homing missiles, colour-coded obstructions and enemies that emit deadly beams of light when destroyed. Each stage also introduces a new upgrade – defensive shields deployed with horizontal sweeps of the stylus or whirlwinds summoned by concentric circles to draw fire away.

Aurélien Regard, Arkedo's co-founder, is responsible for the majority of *Big Bang Mini*'s conceptualisation and can be solely credited with its delectable visual style – a mash-up of absinthe-induced visuals, cheeky caricature and neon 8bit nostalgia. There's more than a little of Tetsuya Mizuguchi's inspired eclecticism to the way *Big Bang Mini* looks, but cut with a Gallic humour and sense of absurdity. Each of the ten stages has a distinct style, from the Hello Kitty-esque cutesiness of Aurora, where you face down cloud-surfing penguins and a giant walrus, to a haunted village's lurid sumi-e strokes and the boisterous comic-book superheroism of New York. Our favourite was the Luxor, an appropriately gaudy Egyptian-themed explosion of pixels.

One thing that may give the notoriously unforgiving shooter fan pause is that the game is so highly accessible, with even the later levels of the arcade mode proving approachable to new players. Thankfully, a raft of extra modes extend the game's life and introduce those more punitive forms of play so beloved by shooter enthusiasts (see 'Extending to every extra'). With the advent of downloadable distribution easing overheads, Guermonprez suggests that small, creative-led boutique studios will become increasingly viable – and looking at the credentials of *Big Bang Mini*, this can only be a welcome thing.



In Kamakura, you need to defeat a series of skeleton marionettes and their puppet master. Dawdling causes a lethal darkness to encroach from the sides of the screen

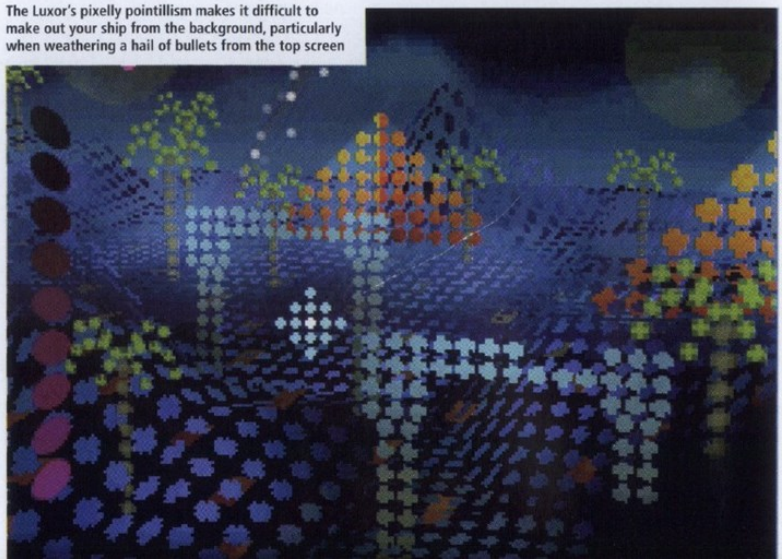




Extending to every extra

It says something of the team's guileless enthusiasm that, having attached a publisher to the game, it threw extra value into the deal with unbidden additional material – a challenge mode with online leaderboards for the longest player survival times, a versus mode, a mission mode, a passive screensaver mode and even an alarm clock mode, which wakes you up with one of the in-game tracks. It also says something of the outfit's eccentric humour: for each additional mode Guermonprez sent an invoice to publisher Southpeak for a zero sum.

The Luxor's pixelly pointillism makes it difficult to make out your ship from the background, particularly when weathering a hail of bullets from the top screen




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The *Monster Hunter* factor was also clearly felt at the Tokyo Game Show's shopping area, where a two-hour-long queue formed at Capcom's stand for licensed merchandise

Monster Hunter 3

Shoot 'em, stab 'em, eat 'em and gang up on 'em in the game where the only good monster is a dead and looted one



***MH3* also supports the Classic controller, but given the Wii Remote implementation this is more of a sop to former PlayStation players than a serious alternative**

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2009 (JAPAN), TBA (UK, US)**

They came in their thousands for *Monster Hunter 3*. If there was a game of TGS 2008, one that people travelled to see, then this was it. Queues stretched for between three and four hours in waiting time and had to be capped early in the day – many, of course, using the delay to catch up on their *Monster Hunter Portable 2nd G*. It was hard to miss the system-selling potential of the series when a line of PSPs waited patiently to play pretty much the same thing on a Wii, and it was certainly noticed by the SCE executives who made the short walk over from the Square Enix booth to marvel at the hubbub.

Few non-believers will be swayed by the basics of *MH3*. This is a straight series instalment that concentrates on the core experience while playing around with some of the Wii hardware's possibilities. Most notably, it's quite beautiful. Capcom may have leaped to the forefront of Wii development if the long draw distances and lighting are anything to go by, despite the company's insistence that the demo featured incomplete visuals. The processing power isn't just for the pretty plants, either, but goes towards creating a stronger sense of wildlife in motion as you move around the world, watching creatures chase and feed on one another.

The game uses the Wii Remote to direct both camera and targeting. Simply pointing at a section of an enemy will focus attacks, although no 'locking' system was available in the demo code and it seems unlikely one will be included. While battling, slight tilting of the Remote cycled through the possible actions: guarding, use of a shield, type of attack. Nothing has yet been confirmed with regard to MotionPlus compatibility, but the likelihood is that the game is too far advanced in development for any radical implementations of its capabilities.

Combat is straightforward enough, with differing Remote swings for various types of blow and the ability to charge up attacks, as well as a fairly simple combo system that amounts to rapid shaking. The real challenges are the different tactics required for each type of boss, most of which depend on co-operation between various classes of hunter (the vanilla one being melee and long range). The biggest innovation for the series lies here, however, with the addition of underwater combat. This places a time limit (ten minutes) on deep-sea hunting, necessitating some real co-ordination between diving characters to take down the bigger beasties, although combat appears much like previous instalments.

Many are hoping that *Monster Hunter 3* will be a turning point for Wii in Japan. Not in terms of sales, but in terms of perceptions among Japanese consumers, who still look on PS2 as the last great 'gamer's console'. The huge popularity of the title during TGS, and the very favourable feedback Capcom has had from fans and the press, suggests it may just have a chance.



There are lots of new creatures and bosses, but the biggest dragon of all remains the game's loading times, which are as a mammoth as previous iterations



Spare change hunting

In terms of group hunting (the main reason for the series' popularity on PSP), *Monster Hunter 3* is likely to give Wii its biggest online workout to date, with support for parties of up to four (as well as local splitscreen). Unfortunately, there's no word yet on support for WiiSpeak, while the ever-alert Capcom refuses to comment on rumours of DLC. So you can expect to be forking out for 'extra' locations, monsters and weapons within weeks of release.


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The return of Fuma (below left) won't mean much to non-aficionados, but he's either back from the dead or has a lookalike. He's behind most in-game events, and is enough of a mover for the CIA to get involved



Yakuza 3

Sega goes back to the metropolis to indulge some violent tendencies



Animations are currently a little rigid, but this is balanced by the spectacle of the fights which, as ever, have plenty of contextual finishers. During the course of the game, Kazuma unlocks an arena to fight special opponents and acquire cash

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SPRING (JAPAN), TBA (UK, US)**

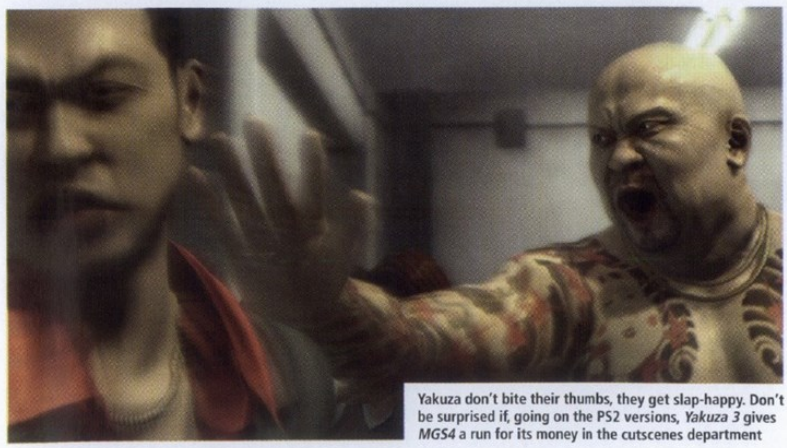
If there's a constant in organised crime, it's that there'll always be people that just need beating up. After the side story, *Kenzan*, *Yakuza* is returning to the character of Kazuma Kiryu for the third game proper. Some of *Yakuza 3* is iterative – improved visuals, Japanese celebrity talent on voiceover duty, more real-world brands inserted into its virtual Japan – but the concept has always begged for a little more horsepower to be fully realised, and this is its opportunity.

The story starts in Okinawa, where Kazuma and the young orphan Haruka find refuge after the tangled fallout from *Yakuza 2*. Soon, however, they head to the mainland and Tokyo. Here *Yakuza* begins to impress, seamlessly streaming its environment and moving smoothly into combat – a gang shouts insults or challenges Kazuma, and people begin to take cover or distance themselves from the impending conflict. This quickly creates a natural ring in which Kazuma demonstrates he's lost none of his flair with tyre-irons, broken bottles and fire hydrants.

One innovative addition is Kazuma's ability to learn new moves by watching them being performed – this is accomplished by using his mobile phone to capture the moment, in a currently rather comical cutscene. The biggest change, though, is that *Yakuza 3* has a more mature tone than its predecessors. In combat, blood spills from your enemies' wounds, and several of Kazuma's moves are efficient and often nothing short of vicious. There's also a political undertone in its inclusion of real-world issues like the ongoing local opposition to the American army presence in Okinawa.

The main quest aside, however, *Yakuza 3*'s side streets and shiny distractions look likely to remain the real draw, and where a lot of processing power is being directed. As well as the shops, bars and clubs familiar from previous instalments, a smattering of arcade minigames (that will likely become a flood) and even a civilised game of golf suggest the designers will be putting Kazuma's best foot forward. The golf course, incidentally, is an actual location in Okinawa rather than a menu option in an arcade.

Yakuza 2 may have been excellent, but its belated arrival on western shores undoubtedly did the series a disservice. It also made its host hardware creak at times in producing its beautiful, stylish locations, and left you thinking about how much difference a bit more technical grunt could have made to the details. Several years in the making, and with the dry run of *Yakuza Kenzan* in the bank, *Yakuza 3* could make you an offer you can't refuse.



Yakuza don't bite their thumbs, they get slap-happy. Don't be surprised if, going on the PS2 versions, *Yakuza 3* gives *MGS4* a run for its money in the cutscenes department



Hostess Twinkies

The cabaret and hostess bars have always been an intoxicating part of *Yakuza*'s atmosphere, something taken to its apex with the new create-a-hostess mode (not the official title, but it should be). Obviously taking a few tips from *The Idolm@ster*, this lets you make up a starlet and take her through various levels of challenge as some kind of manager, eventually making her 'the queen of all', according to the Japanese text. Kazuma can sing via a rhythm minigame to keep his own end up, while some famous 'kyabajou' ('queens of cabaret') will appear throughout this sidequest – and collecting their cards is yet another distraction.

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FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **LEVEL-5**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER 25 (JAPAN), TBA (UK/US)**

White Knight Chronicles

He might look like a bit of a loner, but this knight's bringing his friends to the party

Playable at TGS 2007, but absent from TGS 2008 three months before release, there are a few alarm bells ringing around *White Knight Chronicles*. Level-5 has been enjoying considerable success over the past few years with *Professor Layton*, and the upcoming *Dragon Quest IX* will doubtless extend this handheld honeymoon even further – but there are dark murmurings that SCE has had to bring a little pressure to bear to ensure *White Knight* sees release this year in any kind of condition.

Despite there being no noticeable improvement in its graphics from 2007's showing, this is still an exceptional-looking game. Initial indications of a singleplayer RPG are mistaken as, no doubt inspired by *Monster Hunter*, online play is the core of *White Knight*. This is an area in which Level-5 has shown rather ambiguous form, having developed the cancelled *True Fantasy Live Online* for Xbox, one of the problems with which was alleged inexperience with network code. Regardless, the standalone Story Side mode remains, as does *TFLO*'s advanced editing tool that enables avatar creation down to the smallest facial details.

White Knight resembles *Phantasy Star Online* in the way parties are quickly formed to tackle particular dungeons, and network play will affect the singleplayer narrative. Level-5 hopes this will ensure that the online component is not viewed as a distraction but a useful addition to standalone play: to this end, the game automatically saves progress in singleplayer when a player is invited to a lobby, and certain items necessary for bonus content can only be found online. There might be a few questions hanging over *White Knight Chronicles*, but don't be surprised if Level-5 comes up with a few convincing answers.



The emphasis is on scale, with enemies that make this natty blue example look like a pipsqueak: one screen shows a turtle with a city on its back







Players can create their own combos, all in preparation for when they fill their gauges by using normal attacks to transform into the titular White Knight

Star Ocean 4: The Last Hope

So there's not going to be a fifth? Or is this Final Fantasy all over again?

Humanity fragments into opposing pockets, the landscape turns brown and big rats run around. It's apocalypse time again. Luckily, *Star Ocean 4*'s humans have a bit of initiative and end up heading for the stars, with four exploration teams sent to the ends of the universe.

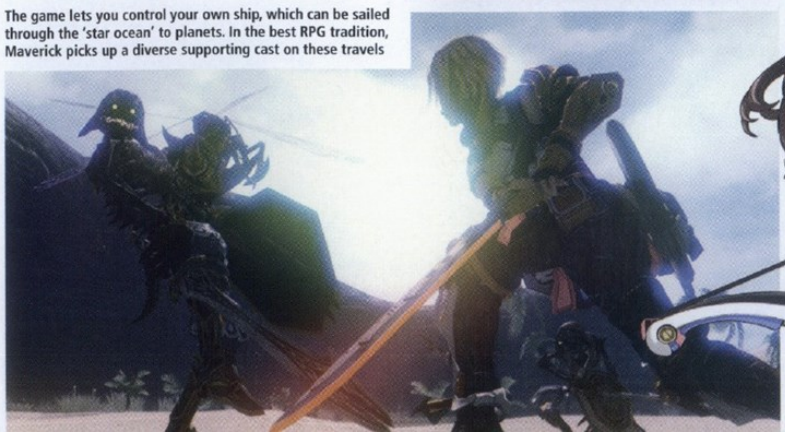
The epic premise is supported by the splendid name of its hero: Edge Maverick. Sadly, however, there's not much of a maverick touch on show in the game's fundamentals. *Star Ocean 4* retains the well-balanced realtime battle system of its predecessors, reinforced with new dodges, double jumps and aerial combos. New touches include the ability to pre-program combination attacks: a string of commands can be composed inside a menu screen and then assigned to a controller shortcut. Enemies now have lines of sight, and thus can be avoided, surprised and escaped from.

Unfortunately, there's something a little compromised about the visual presentation. While they're stylistically appealing, the environment textures in particular have a low-res, blocky feel. Weak floor textures are exacerbated by the lack of anything to break up their flat planes, with very little in the way of foliage, crates, lumps or bumps.

There are, in fact, a lot of similarities to tri-Ace's recent *Infinite Undiscovery*, a slightly underpolished JRPG that had moments of charm. In its defence, *Star Ocean 4*'s combat works well and its world is interesting – and that may be more than enough to distinguish it from the other JRPGs currently crowding Microsoft's console.







The game lets you control your own ship, which can be sailed through the 'star ocean' to planets. In the best RPG tradition, Maverick picks up a diverse supporting cast on these travels

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **TRI-ACE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 19 (JAPAN), MARCH 3 (US), SPRING (UK)**





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LocoRoco 2

With this sequel, SCEJ only wants rolling to gather fans

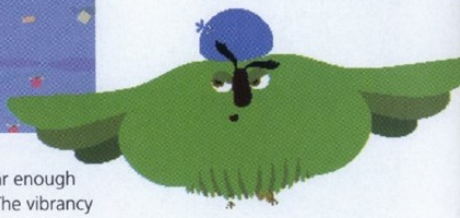
FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **SCEJ**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 21 (UK)**
DECEMBER 4 (JAPAN), TBC (US)

On paper, *LocoRoco 2* might seem to be a hack-job of a sequel. Instead of fitting out a home for your saved LocoRocos with items found around the levels, as in the original, here you do much the same thing for the little blue Mui Muis hidden around them. A new set of minigames provide a dash of rhythm-action here and a splash of whack-a-mole there, while prerendered sequences join up the levels into a semi-coherent story. But, as disposable as these tweaked features may seem, and as imaginatively identical as the visual style is, *LocoRoco 2* manages to capture just what made its forebear so appealing, with its fundamental mechanic of identifying hidden chambers, breakable floors and interactive features, such as a sapling that can be gently coaxed into blooming.

But this sequel seems to improve on the formula, too. Movement is tightened up slightly, making tricky jumps that little bit less frustrating to nail, and LocoRocos can now dive underwater. Levels are subtly more detailed and deliciously alive with movement and reaction to your rolling passage. As well as collecting pickories, which can buy items, and gathering LocoRocos and Mui Muis, SCEJ has added stamps (which are used in a stamp-collecting minigame) and notes. Notes are awarded for clearing an evil black goo that has invaded the LocoRocos' world, and by diving into various environmental elements to pop out of their various apertures and sing – provided that you have gathered enough LocoRocos to fill them all. The better you tap out the rhythm to the *LocoRoco* theme music, the greater the reward.

The level selection screen also makes the action more cohesive, each depicting the principal actors in each area undergoing various indignities as a result of the black goo, and encouraging you to clear enough of it to make things right again. The vibrancy and charm of *LocoRoco*'s idiosyncratic world is more than enough to make the prospect of that process most definitely appealing.





LocoRocos must occasionally pile into rolling balls or rocks that can break through walls. These masses squeeze new play out of the formula – a square one must be delicately jiggled into square holes to pass through, for instance





***LocoRoco 2*'s greatest achievement is the variety of details and characters you'll encounter. Many large elements must be sung at to stimulate imaginative scripted sequences that allow progress. With branches depressing under the Locos' weight and bushes rustling, the world is always reacting to their presence**

Infinite Space

PlatinumGames boldly goes where no DS game has gone before

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **PLATINUMGAMES**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SPRING (JAPAN), TBC (UK, US)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E190**

Infinite Space isn't as easy a sell as the other titles upcoming from PlatinumGames. No arm-mounted chainsaws, dominatrix pugilists with high heels or Shinji Mikami here – just the emptiness of deep space. A recent hands-on session with the game cleared up the basics, but made its ultimate destiny as a cult hit or a doomed obscurity little clearer.

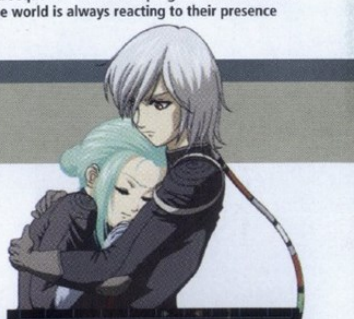
The protagonist begins on a world where access to deep space is prohibited: a huge portal hangs in the sky, a window to untravelled worlds but blocked by an unknown power's fleet. Soon he finds his way out and the galaxy opens up, with hundreds of NPC characters and spaceships filling the many detailed 3D star systems.

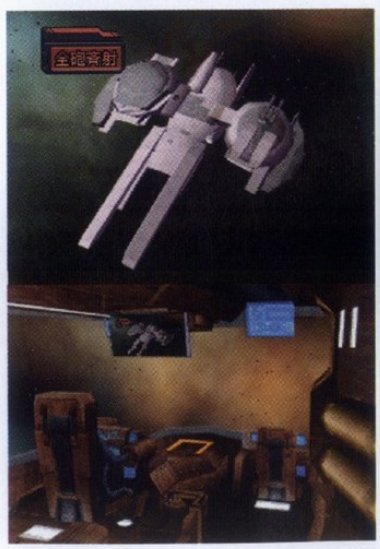
The upper screen shows the ships, while basic commands fill the touchscreen. For a game whose focus is exploration and starship battles, tactics are relatively limited, with a few manoeuvres and attacks dependent on a power gauge. At least the latter gives it a bit of oomph when filled, accessing an ultimate strike that unleashes all weapons at once. While space is drawn in 3D, the action actually plays out in 2D, and there are some odd omissions: it's impossible at the moment to target specific sections of an enemy ship.

It also has to be said that *Infinite Space* isn't quite as visually resplendent as it might be. Ships are composed of a few basic polygons with only a handful of textures, and even the special effects are a little underwhelming. It's one of the few DS games that makes you pine for the screen and technical grunt of Sony's PSP. Final judgement, though, has to be reserved for a longer playtest, as our time with *Infinite Space* made clear its dependence on leisurely fiddling – this is about building ships and getting lost in far-flung worlds, not just playing at star battles.



This fine fellow is our protagonist. Apparently the game is about his discovering what it means to be human, with Arthur C Clarke's Journey's End a much-cited influence







Each ship is completely customisable, down to the level of cabin placement. *Infinite Space* is the project of Hifumi Kouno, who has previously directed the *Steel Battalion* series and worked on *Clock Tower* and its sequel

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **HIGH VOLTAGE SOFTWARE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH**

The Conduit

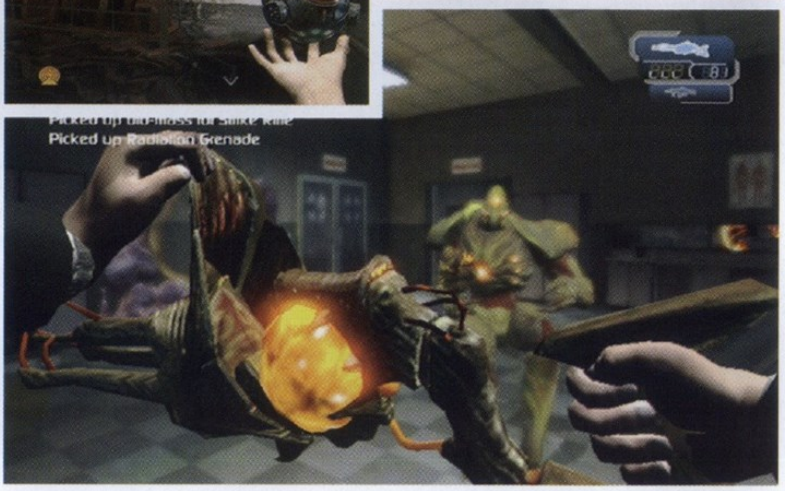
The FPS that stretches the Wii hardware – and its controls, too





As well as reloading, the minus button also picks up weapons without being held down, so you'll regularly find yourself with a new gun when all you wanted to do was change your clip. Having zoom on the D-pad proves an awkward thumb stretch





High Voltage Studios has been very vocal lately in decrying what it sees as the technical under-achievements of other developers' work on Wii. *The Conduit* is therefore the studio's line in the sand, an intended new benchmark for Wii's graphical capabilities. And it looks pretty good. Not quite Xbox good, perhaps, but there's a smattering of bump-mapping here, a lash of bloom there, rippling and reflective water, shadows, depth-of-field, sprays of particles and ragdoll physics to which Wii owners won't be accustomed, all running at a smooth framerate. And, admirably, the techniques are subtly implemented, a point that prevents *The Conduit* from feeling like little more than a tech demo.

The payoff, however, is that the demo we've played takes place mainly in identically styled dark, dingy corridors, occasionally lined with crates and boxes for cover and taking a right-angle turn now and then. There are several more open areas, including one on the steps of a porticoed building by the side of a river, so both engine and hardware can actually take it. In all, the level design feels distinctly last-generation, with much valve turning and switch pressing to be done. Enemy AI, meanwhile, will generally manage to find cover and retreat from heavy fire, but otherwise shows little intelligence – a point the game perhaps tries to explain by referring to them as puppets. Apparently, they're mind-controlled in some fashion by mysterious alien beings that pour through portals found later in the level.

The storyline follows the investigation of neurotoxin-possessing terrorists by a secret conspiracy-theory-inspired government agency, but quickly spirals into an alien invasion threat. Obviously, you'll be dealing with it using an array of guns, first familiar sub-machine guns and rifles, but later more exotic alien and experimental human technology. A trip through the statistics menu reveals a long list of weaponry, including the de-atomiser, which features a charged alternative fire mode that shoots double energy bolts that wrap around a target and explode.

More important, of course, is the control scheme, which is similar to *Metroid Prime 3*'s. Aiming and looking are mapped to the Wii Remote in pointer mode, and the Nunchuk moves forward, backward and strafes, while a throwing motion tosses grenades. Motion feels weighty and firing is precise with the default set-up, though another trip into the menu reveals that a comprehensive series of tweaks are possible. But as close as the scheme can feel to a mouse and keyboard at its best, at its worst it's more awkward than it needs to be. The main problem is that accessing such controls as the minus button (reload) and D-pad (to switch weapons or zoom in) tends to throw out your aim.

The issue is with the Remote's less-than-ergonomic button layout for anything other than A and B, and it's one that makes you question Wii's fundamental appropriateness for games that require controls as complex as those needed for a modern FPS. *The Conduit*, nevertheless, could well prove Wii's best example so far, even if that's rather faint praise.



Weird science

A touch of puzzle solving is provided by the presence of the All Seeing Eye, a hovering metallic ball, accessed with the plus button, which projects a mysterious pattern of light out into the environment. Not just a neat graphical trick, it also acts as a kind of key – lock on to specific bits of the level and it will unlock doors. You'll also come across ghost mines – floating explosives that you can't see until you shine the Eye's eldritch light on them to begin their defusing. The game also features secrets: find a symbol with the light and you'll get a small puzzle to solve based on rotating rings. In each case, the Remote beeps to indicate that it's time to take the Eye out.





***The Conduit* features segmented regenerating health, similar to that of *Resistance: Fall Of Man*, but the game is not particularly good at communicating the damage you're taking, which leads to many deaths**



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FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEJ**
DEVELOPER: **FROM SOFTWARE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2009**

Demon's Souls

From Software takes a break from ninjas to play with things that go bump in the night



The physics are at an early stage, meaning the corpses of enemies can be merrily bounced around the arenas and spun on the ground



In Japan, the joke goes that *Demon's Souls* might as well be renamed *King's Field HD*. It comes from the same body of talent and experience behind that PS1-era series, and has more than a few thematic parallels. The main difference is the view, switching from firstperson to third.

You're a knight investigating a castle infested with various creatures or possessed beings, and giving any uppity scoundrels a whack. That can prove a little difficult, however, as thanks to a truly bizarre design decision lock-on has been assigned to R3 – meaning you need to click in while simultaneously controlling the camera.

At this early stage in its development, the visuals are still basic, though it's obvious From Software is aiming for a direction similar to *Ninja Blade*. This also explains the poor AI, with its fondness for hiding behind wooden barricades and just waiting for the player. At least they showed off a few different moves, smoothly alternating between melee attacks, fireballs and arrows. Your own attacks are based around attacks on the R buttons and defensive manoeuvres on the L buttons – one notable feature is the ability to cycle through which weapon or shield each hand holds with the D-pad.



Surprisingly, this game was shown in the Adults Only section of the SCEJ booth at the Tokyo Game Show, presumably because of all the scary beasties

Seeing *Demon's Souls* in its current condition was a little disappointing – it's not technically groundbreaking, nor does it offer any particularly innovative gameplay features. Naturally, everything will be given a polish in later builds, but *Demon's Souls*' overall showing at TGS had a similar vibe to that of *Ninja Blade*, leaving people wondering about From Software and its ambitions beyond just having another new title in its catalogue.

Ninja Blade

It's the time of year to grit your teeth and get on with some gaidening

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **FROM SOFTWARE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2009**



Let's be honest. He looks more than a bit like Ryu Hayabusa. Even the game logo is suspiciously similar. With Team Ninja in disarray, Xbox 360's next Japanese action fix is coming from another source, but it's no *Ninja Gaiden II*. But that's not from a lack of trying. A demo of *Ninja Blade* suggests that it's not going to be composed of much more than a mix of ninja, monsters and 360, all apparently chosen to appeal to the western market.

The game consists of two main phases. One is a barely interactive movie that unfolds perhaps a little too like *Dragon's Lair*. QTE commands are briefly displayed on screen for a short period, and if the player fails to press the right button it's mission failed and time to restart the sequence from the first command. It's sensational looking, to be sure, and as the commands are always the same rather than randomised, they can be memorised to impress gullible friends.

In the other main phase of the game, the player has full control over the main character, with the D-pad used to select between the four weapon types. Ninja Vision, meanwhile, provides a slowdown effect and better perception of enemy moves and positions.





Suffice it to say that the action doesn't quite live up to the screenshots, although its reproduction of Tokyo has its own character. It's a pity that the game itself fails to stand out as being more than a 'ninja game for the west', consisting as it does of yet another demon attack on the Japanese capital

Despite underwhelming presentation (though development is at around 60 per cent), the Tokyo setting is well realised. The demo finished with a huge spider boss, perched atop one of its skyscrapers, that required the player to rush towards it while avoiding its sonic boom-ish attacks. At close range, it's time to switch to heavy sword in order to take out its front legs and begin the damage dealing in earnest.

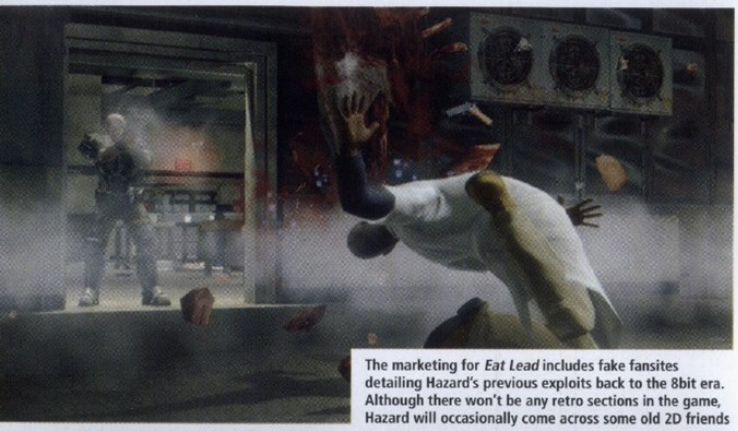
Ninja Blade may be aiming to provide a short but cinematically intensive ride, but we wonder whether its reliance on QTEs and over-obvious inspiration might see it fall some way short of that objective.


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FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **D3 PUBLISHER**
DEVELOPER: **VICIOUS CYCLE SOFTWARE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2009**

Eat Lead: The Return Of Matt Hazard

Matt Hazard hails to the King, baby – but is he just a pretender to the crown?



The marketing for *Eat Lead* includes fake fansites detailing Hazard's previous exploits back to the 8bit era. Although there won't be any retro sections in the game, Hazard will occasionally come across some old 2D friends





If *Duke Nukem* wasn't enough of a knowingly anachronistic action star, then Vicious Cycle has added yet another level of satire to a genre which is already fairly self-consciously reliant on cliché. Matt Hazard may have only existed publicly since this September, but in Vicious Cycle's fictional history of videogames he's one of its most loved heroes. Having fallen on hard times after an ill-advised attempt to branch out into family-friendly territory, Hazard is offered a chance to redeem his name with a new thirdperson shooter, only to discover that it's all part of a dastardly assassination attempt against him.

Since this self-aware set-up pits Hazard against foes from his back catalogue of titles, Vicious Cycle has a good excuse to pilfer ideas from throughout gaming's history under the name of satire, much as Free Radical did with *TimeSplitters*. As Hazard's unseen nemesis hacks the game, zombies and cowboys turn up alongside the ordinary Mafioso goons, and a meat locker turns into the wild west. Vicious Cycle claims to be pretty eclectic in its knowing thievery, but its success relies wholly upon the game's wit. Hazard can make all the quips he likes about the level designer's lack of ingenuity – but a boring location is still boring, even if the protagonist acknowledges the fact. Oddly, Hazard himself isn't an obvious '90s videogame cliché, but the kind of bald croaking lunk that has more in common with *Army Of Two*'s wearying protagonists than those of *Duke Nukem* or *Commander Keen*.

Vicious Cycle says it doesn't matter if players don't get the joke – there's a solid thirdperson shooter underneath with a deep cover system. We hope that the satire here is more than a crutch for limited imagination, because without a razor-sharp wit *Eat Lead* risks being a rehash of the clichés it attempts to lampoon.





Eat Lead's cover system adds a number of extra moves to the standard *Gears Of War* set, including the option to rotate around to another side of an object. You can also point at a location some distance away and hit a button to go straight into cover there, as in *Quantum Of Solace*

Burn, Zombie, Burn

It's close to midnight, and a PSN game's lurking in the dark

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **DOUBLESIX GAMES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q1 2009**

Surprisingly for a top-down PSN game, it's easier to describe what *Burn, Zombie, Burn* isn't than what it is. It's not *Geometry Wars*, for example, the shoulder buttons handling firing duties and locking on to nearby enemies. A hostile touch doesn't equal death, either, flame-haired hero Bruce able to withstand an energy bar's worth of contact with the zombies, 120 of which can shuffle on to the screen at once. The game isn't even that similar to LucasArts' *Zombies Ate My Neighbors*, the action limited to small suburban arenas. The zombies, meanwhile, respawn until you either die or run out of time, depending on the mode.



Levels vary from the traditional graveyard, woods and suburbia to a military base, while chainsaws and cricket bats join machine-guns and pistols as ways of putting the shambling hordes further into misery

Nor is this a game you'll instantly pick up. Bruce wields chainsaws, baseball bats and machine-guns yet, unusually, reverts at a button press to the default flamethrower. The all-important risk involves building up your multiplier by keeping zombies on fire, the gridlock of human torches clogging up your escape routes. The reward is dropping one of several available explosives and watching the flash-fire take them out, a score rising from each pile of ash. It's not easy, especially when suicide zombies ('Exploders', one of eight types in the game) and environmental proximity mines start doing the job for you, sabotaging your multiplier. Each location has its own unique mechanic – a UFO attack is one, a movement-impeding rainstorm another – triggered when you max out three weapons through repeat use.

It's a lot to take in, which is kind of the idea. *Burn, Zombie, Burn* isn't about geometry, patterns and sequences so much as tributes, gimmicks and visual gags. That said, none of its extra modes has been taken lightly: Midnight Boomstick gives you a mere torch to light your way, Defence a girlfriend who refuses to leave the car while her nails need doing, even when the horde is munching on the wing mirrors. It's the commitment to the score attack that keeps all of it in check – even the Dance Gun, which with its infectious rhythms brings to mind a Michael Jackson video. With splitscreen modes doubling the fun, these zombies should at least eat several hours, neighbours notwithstanding.



The engine is powerful and the maps finely realised – an attractive combo as the camera zooms out. The entire game is lacquered with love for everything undead, from Shaun Of The Dead to John Landis



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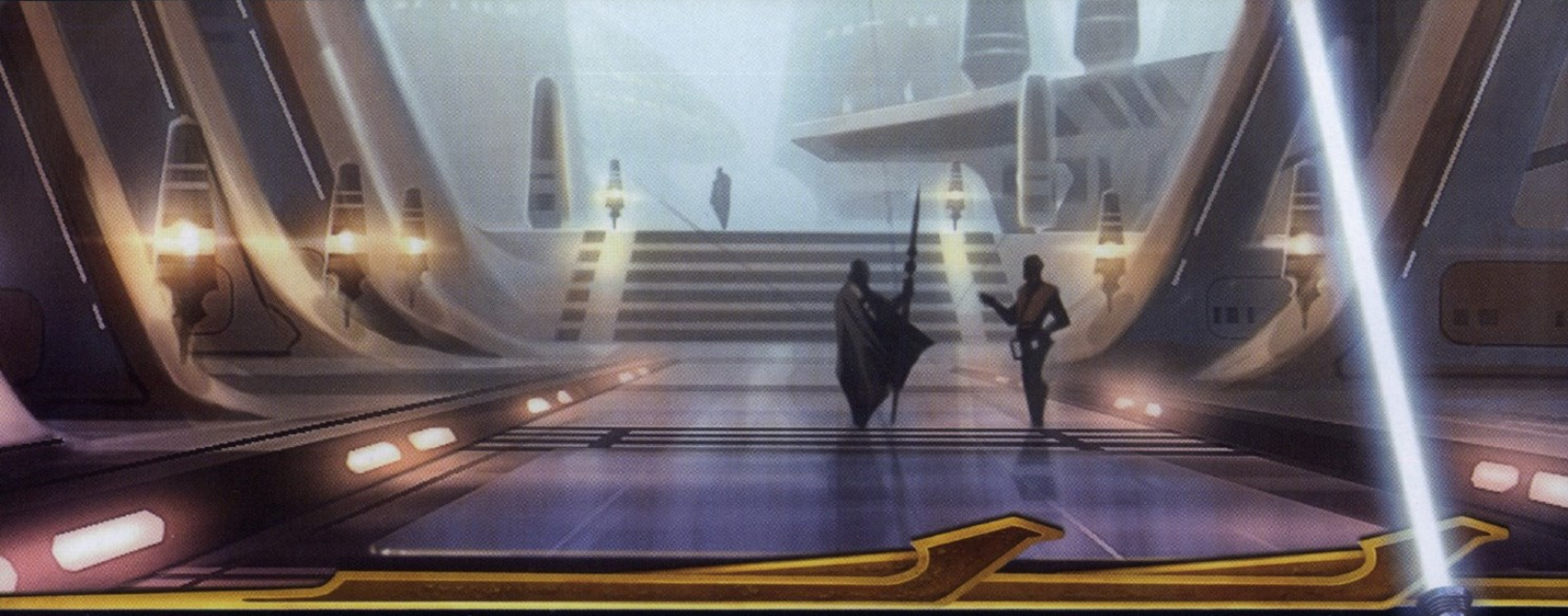
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AN OLD HOPE

BIOWARE AND LUCASARTS HAVE FINALLY REVEALED THEIR STAR WARS MMORPG, THE OLD REPUBLIC. BUT WILL THE GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY STAND OUT IN A GENRE THAT HAS ITS OWN ATTACK OF THE CLONES?





The lights go down in the Letterman Digital Arts Centre in San Francisco, and *The Old Republic* logo appears. "This has been pretty much the worst-kept secret in videogaming" says **Darrell Rodriguez**, president of LucasArts, smiling from the podium. From here, it looks like the widest grin in the world.

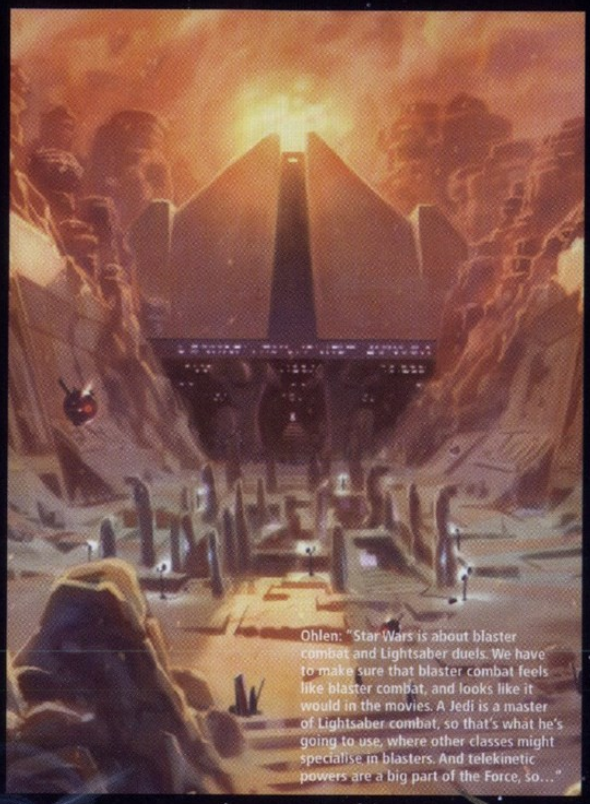
A thousand guesses vindicated, a thousand forums ignited, a thousand bloggers blogging. Rodriguez is right to smile. A lot of people still have that stomach-flipping feeling when a new Star Wars property is announced, and expectations for *TOR* have managed the tail-devouring trick of passing from rumour to certainty to reality. It's a dream combination: Star Wars, BioWare, LucasArts and the magical money-spinning acronym MMORPG. You can almost hear glasses clinking to the brand synergy.

It was a queer launch event, dedicated solely to announcing a game that everyone already knew existed. Even discounting the leaks from BioWare or a former LucasArts employee, the name was trademarked in July this year and at E3 John Riccitiello confirmed that BioWare's upcoming MMORPG would be connected to *Knights Of The Old Republic*. BioWare and Lucasarts had even issued a joint press release way back on October 30, 2007 announcing that they were partnering on a "ground breaking entertainment product".

This feverish scrap-hunting was the context for *TOR*'s 'official' announcement. As it turned

TITLE: **STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC** FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **EA/LUCASARTS** DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE AUSTIN** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **TBC**





Ohlen: "Star Wars is about blaster combat and Lightsaber duels. We have to make sure that blaster combat feels like blaster combat, and looks like it would in the movies. A Jedi is a master of Lightsaber combat, so that's what he's going to use, where other classes might specialise in blasters. And telekinetic powers are a big part of the Force, so..."

out, it also provided most of the day's content, with few indications as to how exactly *TOR* is going to be "ground breaking". **Ray Muzyka**, CEO of BioWare, set the pace with the impressive-sounding but detail-free "it's a whole galaxy, it's a galaxy of Star Wars". Not to be outdone, BioWare president **Greg Zeschuk** gushed about how the game is running on internal networks, before showing a staged trailer with the John Williams score.

One thing that was clear, however, is that Star Wars has a host of reasons for being prime MMOG material, even though the less-than-stellar performance of *Star Wars Galaxies* means there should be no complacency about the licence. It is perhaps the most visually iconic science-fiction setting that exists, and one with incredible mainstream awareness.

The game takes a few visual cues from the new Clone Wars aesthetic introduced by the recent film and TV series: characters have simplified body structures, bright flat colours and the odd exaggerated feature. Each asset is hand-painted rather than using photo-sourced textures, giving everything a slightly unreal and highly distinctive sheen.

In terms of movement, characters have the floaty-footed quality common to MMOGs, but the combat does seem to pack a little more of a wallop than usual. "It plays to the strengths of the medium a lot more. We're proud of what we did with *KOTOR*, but a lot of people felt it wasn't as action-packed as it could have been," says **James Ohlen**, *TOR*'s creative designer. "This is a faster-paced system that focuses on making the player feel like a hero – four players all beating on one enemy; that's not what you think of as heroic. It's usually the heroes who are outnumbered, and that's the kind of feeling we're going for." The combat is realtime (previous *KOTOR* games stopped the action while you selected attacks, obviously impossible in an MMOG), and while there's still a slight sense of enemies dancing in front of one another rather than engaging in a fight to the death, there's no denying the work that's gone into the visual effects: blaster shots fizz, electricity crackles and Lightsabers clash. How much of the latter is actually under the player's direct control is unanswered for now, but the importance placed on Lightsaber duels in screenshots and the fact it was generally addressed (without any details, naturally) in interviews suggests BioWare is focusing considerable resources on this interaction, and may come up with something surprising.







"WE'RE PROUD OF KOTOR, BUT A LOT OF PEOPLE FELT IT WASN'T AS ACTION-PACKED AS IT COULD HAVE BEEN"

The biggest claim for *TOR*, however, is that while it will have all of the usual elements associated with the MMOG genre, it will combine this with the strong narratives BioWare prides itself on. This raises some intriguing problems. How can decisions in an MMOG be of galaxy-changing importance? How can one player feel like the hero in a game composed of thousands of players?



WATCH IT, KID

Your status as a Force-pumped hero raises a thorny issue, and one that arguably scuppered *The Force Unleashed*. There will be eight classes in the game, two of which are Jedi and Sith. How can an all-powerful Jedi be challenged without resorting to MacGuffins like Force-resistant shields? "Think about the films," says Erickson. "There are lots of really prime, important characters, – and Luke might be the chosen one, but he runs from Boba Fett. There's a guy who has been sent specifically to get that Jedi, and he's been trained in how to do that. There are other abilities out there that can contrast and compete..."



This ugly fellow (left) is the first enemy you'll encounter as a Sith. "It never gets less exciting than that – we didn't want the whole Darth Vader fantasy thing and then someone comes up to you and says, 'Kill a snake'," offers Erickson. This beastie is a slug, obviously much more exciting than a mere snake





How long has BioWare been working on *TOR*? Surprise! "We're not talking about that." In December 2005 BioWare established a studio in Austin, Texas, specifically to work on an MMORPG. Why this is confidential is a mystery, though it may be something to do with the "more than a decade in the making" soundbite

"If you've played BioWare games you'll have a pretty good idea of how the story's structured," begins **Daniel Erickson**, the game's chief writer. "But we're always trying to make storytelling more cinematic, and quicker. It's separated into fairly discernible chunks like the movies, and the stuff that's part and parcel of your world does stay – you make big choices, stuff happens and it stays that way." This doesn't quite answer the big question: how can individuals all be making world-changing decisions in a world that is shared? If the whole galaxy isn't in peril and you, solely you, isn't about to save it, then the traditional BioWare method won't work. "I think about New York City à la Marvel comics," counters Erickson. "If one of the 20 superheroes doesn't show up then the world is doomed. You're all doing your own thing, but somehow coincide for the big moments."

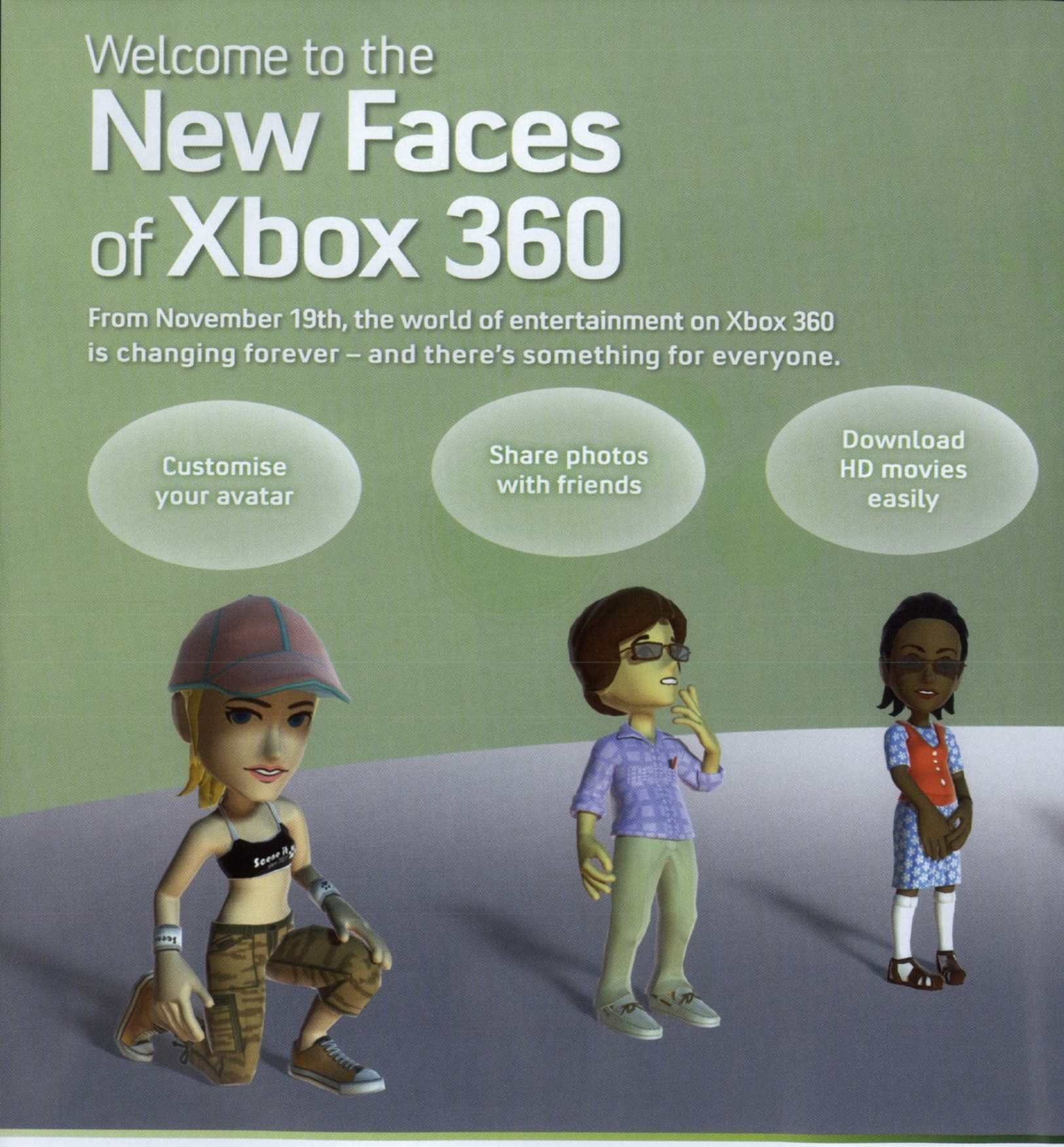
Each of the eight classes also has its own distinct narrative. "If you start our game as a Jedi knight, play from the start to the finish, then you play as a Sith from the start to the finish, you will not see one repeated bit of content. Not one quest, not one line, nothing," says Erickson. Nothing at all? "OK, well, you might see different sides of the same conflict, but this is Star Wars – 'Wars', you know?" A major part of this is another of BioWare's specialities, companion characters. You can have several of these allies, though only one will adventure with you at any one time, and their role is to continually comment on, and presumably try to influence, your behaviour. Zeschuk describes them as "the lens through which you see the world," and they won't hesitate to make their feelings known, good or bad, and will even abandon you if you're constantly doing things they object to.

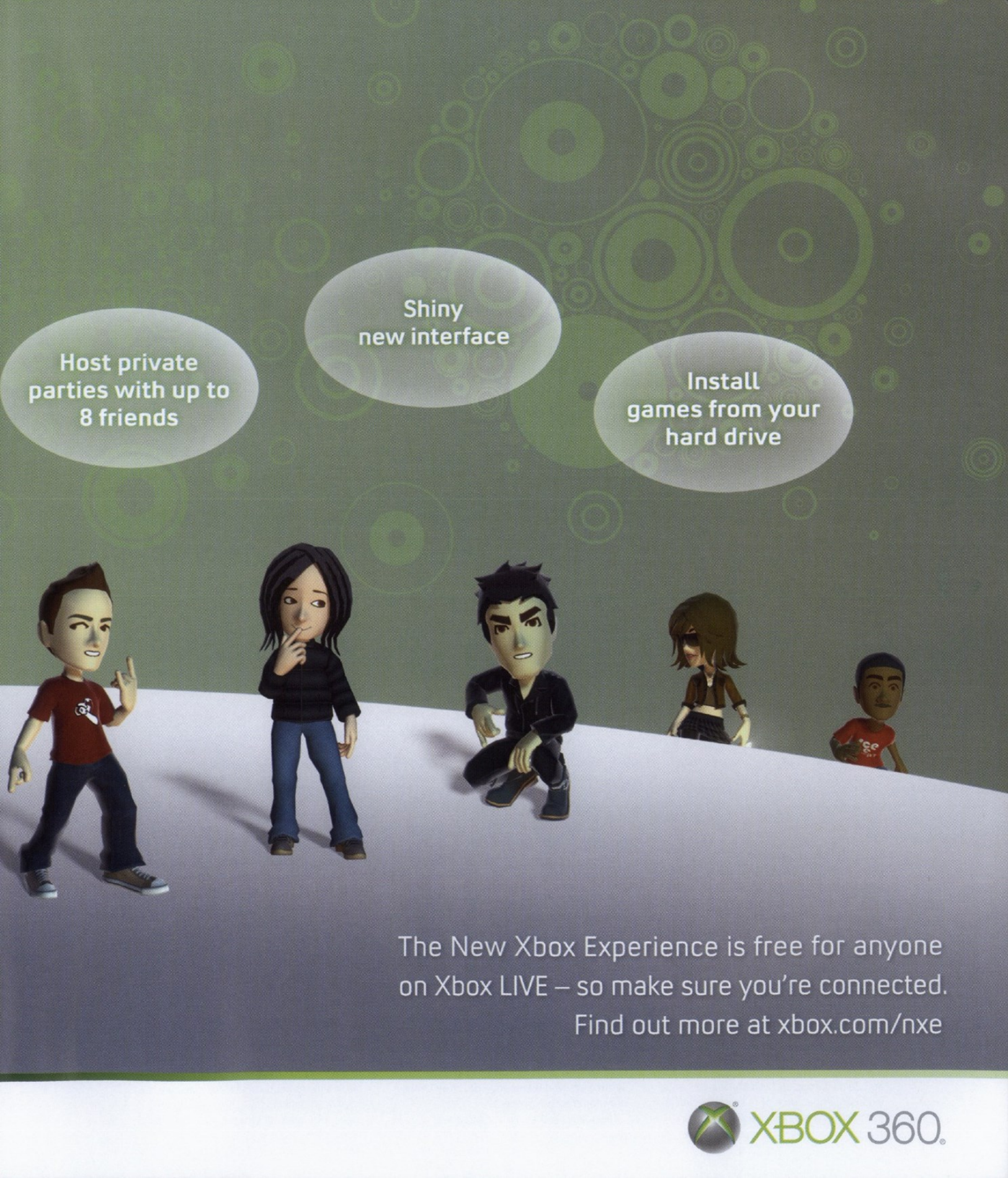
Unfortunately, the most interesting aspects of the game are the ones least is known about. Confirmed are realm vs realm, player vs player, raiding and space travel. Asking BioWare rewards us with a familiar line. "We are building many many worlds and you can travel between them, but what happens then we're not talking about," says Erickson. In-game economy? "We'll have one." Housing? "We're definitely not talking about player housing". The game may be being developed for 360, but "we're only talking about PC today". Best of all, the immortal "we're not talking about anything to do with space today".

Through all this runs that first sentence: "This has been pretty much the worst-kept secret in videogaming". It might be truer to say it still is, such is the confusion about what is a potential 'reveal' and what is necessary detail, and it's brought into sharp focus by a question about the subscription method. "We haven't defined what we're doing, so we don't want to talk about it," ran the first response. This was corrected by the next, and more forthright, answer to: "We do know what we're doing, but we're not talking about it. That's the story." Couldn't have put it better ourselves.



Expect the descendants of major characters from the previous *KOTOR* games to crop up (*TOR* is set 300 years after the ending of *KOTOR II*), as well as the return of familiar droids, likely the assassin droid HK-47 and utility droid T3-M4, the latter probably doling out missions and plot exposition


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XBOX 360

Remo

As his latest non-game is launched, we find Mario's maker at ease with those who've knocked it – and determined to keep pushing in new directions

The last time we spoke with **Shigeru Miyamoto**, Nintendo's future still hung in the balance. Back then, Wii was codenamed Revolution, and Sony, with PS3 months from release, still dominated the game market. Today, the situation is very different, so much so that we hardly bat an eyelid when Miyamoto says: "To tell the truth, I have this big ambition for *Wii Music*, that it can eventually be something so influential that it might be able to influence what music means in the world."

Brash from anyone else, such a statement can only be seen in the light of the massive changes Wii has wrought in the two years since its release, having asserted itself as an essential element of so many family living rooms. *Wii Music* is the latest game to emphasise this ethos, but its awkward centrepiece demonstration during Nintendo's E3 2008 presentation exposed it to heavy criticism by many observers for being simplistic and a declaration of Nintendo's disregard for core gamers. Indeed, reviews of *Wii Music* have already been published by the time we meet Miyamoto, and many have not been complimentary.

It's probably best, however, not to think of *Wii Music* as a game. Miyamoto is, in fact, careful not to refer to it as anything other than just "software" during our interview. It's not driven by scoring. There are no fail states. You simply play with it, your success down to how much you're enjoying yourself and the quality of the noise you're making. Miyamoto is careful to reiterate that his teams are currently working on new *Mario* and *Zelda* games, and *Wii Music* is less an inconsequential piece of mainstream fluff than another piece of finely designed software that's tuned to appeal to all. But it is another reminder that Nintendo is no longer the underdog company championed by gamers during the days of Revolution.

Who did you have in your mind when you created *Wii Music*?

When I'm making something I think in terms of my own family, and always imagine how my entire family can enjoy it together. I think a very large audience can enjoy *Wii Music*. As a matter of fact, when we asked people to do hands-on demos, many of them took to it. High-school students who performed in their own band enjoyed it, and even middle-aged men who have never touched a musical instrument before were excited to play together. Those that are good at playing musical instruments can play with those that can't. I really don't know who are actually going to purchase the game, but I hope that schoolchildren will play. Children get access to music education by first being taught basic theory and then playing musical instruments, but that is really not easy. The primary purpose of letting children learn theory and play instruments is for them to be able to learn the joy of music and how to express themselves through it. I think *Wii Music* approaches it completely differently from the school curriculum – you don't need to learn the difficult theory or master the different instruments, but you will get access to the immediate joy of music itself. I want many small children to get access to *Wii Music*.

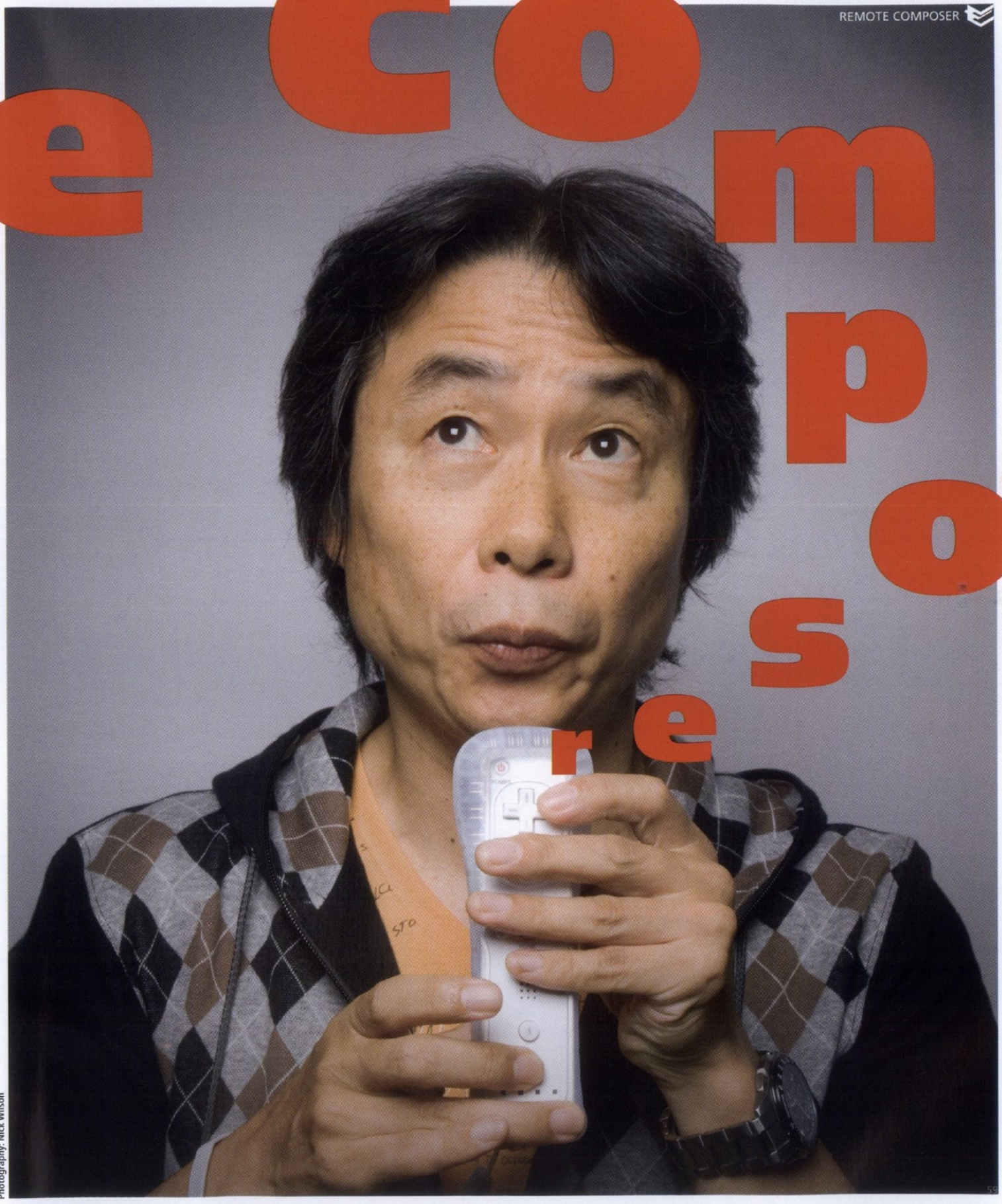
***Wii Fit* and *Wii Music* are both linked to your personal interests – did they share a similar creative process?**

The creative process of *Wii Music* was actually very different. I saw what was fun about raising a dog and created *Nintendogs*. With *Wii Fit* I started weighing myself every day in the hopes of becoming more healthy and I found something that was fun and interesting in that and turned it into a videogame. Rather than finding an impetus in something and turning it into a videogame, *Wii Music* has been an answer to my long life as a struggling musician. I've played instruments and been a fan of music for many, many years. The one problem I've never been able to resolve is that while I wish I was good enough to perform for people, no matter how much I practiced I still feel that my instrument performance is not very good. It feels to me like I've spent the last 30 years trying to become a musician and finally, with *Wii Music*, I've created an instrument that allows me to have that experience. It's almost the answer to a long-standing problem that I've been faced with.

Other music games including *Rhythm Tengoku*, *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* have had great success all over the world – did their success confirm to you that there was a strong market for music games?

Actually, I did not think about other music software at all when we were developing *Wii Music*. The reason why we started the project was due to the original concept of Wii itself. We wanted Wii to become the machine that would be located in the family living room where families would be together and enjoy using it. So music was something we wanted to work on. Simultaneously, I have been playing instruments myself. For many years I have been thinking that I really wanted to make software with which people could enjoy

e composo re

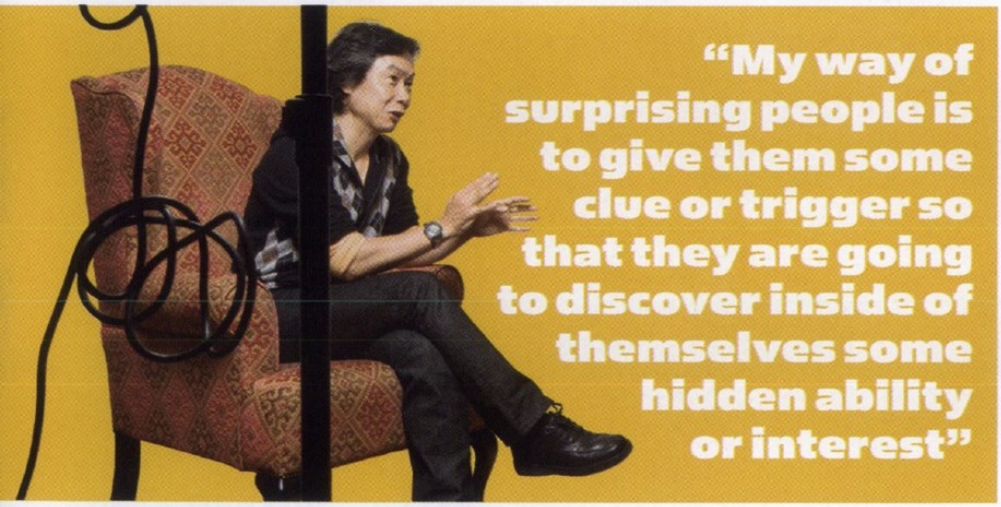


Photography: Nick Wilson

playing with musical instruments. And then, when we had the opportunity to work with the Wii Remote's brand-new interface, it gave me the inspiration that finally we could take advantage of it to mimic the play style of music instruments. So that's the background. When it comes to the existence of other music software, maybe I should say I wish for the success of other music software, but Nintendo and I myself really don't like to be compared to something already exists in the market. We really want to try to be different from the others [laughs]. I don't like it when someone asks me whether it's due to the popularity of other music software that I wanted to make music software. If it wasn't for the success of other software people wouldn't ask! [Laughs]

***Wii Music* encourages players to be creative, like many other games being made right now. Why is that?**
I'm often asked the reason why my games are fun to so many people, so I often thought about that and came to think about it in this fashion: when gameplayers find some creative aspect to a game it can become fun. Videogames are a unique form of entertainment called interactive entertainment. Players are given the opportunity to make their own decisions and plans, and that's how this interactive nature can generate circumstances in which players can become creative. I think that's one of the most appealing points of videogames. When it comes to the creativity of drawing pictures, playing with music instruments – these aren't easy for the great majority of us, but that doesn't mean that people don't like to draw pictures or make music. Simply because it is not easy means that people are hesitant to try to understand the joy in making pictures or music. I think our job is to support them by getting rid of the difficulty of them and getting to the pure fun nature of these activities. But I have been trying to include this kind of nature for players to be creative all the time – when I look back over the *Legend Of Zelda* series, it often included it. When it comes to the general trend in the videogame industry, though, I'm sorry, I don't have the answer!

You mentioned people's fear of mistakes – in many aspects of *Wii Fit* and Wii in general it looks like you've been looking more towards people's behaviour than ever before. Do you ever feel that you're acting more as a behavioural psychologist than a game designer?
I really don't think I've changed in my attitude to making videogames at all. It's just that the possibility of videogames has been expanding due to emerging technologies. What I have been doing is rather simple. I try to use anything around me that's available to give a pleasant surprise to people. And doing that is my joy. I think entertainment is nothing more than that. We want to entertain people by surprising them, so I really don't think we are psychologists – we are nothing but entertainers. Having said that, however, we have to understand how we are going to surprise people. My way of surprising people is often to give them some clue or trigger so that they are going to discover inside of themselves some hidden ability or interest, or something that they already have but did not realise. In order to do so I am actually making a point of thinking what people are thinking, and how they are thinking, what kind of experiences they are having. If you call that psychological, then... [Shrugs]



You also said how you hoped that *Wii Music* could be used among children to promote making music in a way that the curriculum can't. Do you think it's a role of games to educate as well as entertain?
I think I need to come up with very fine and delicate wording about the educational ability of entertainment [laughs] but, frankly speaking, I have never intended to make educational software. But I think it's wrong to completely build a wall between the two. I really don't think that education and entertainment are two different things. For example, people might say that *Brain Training* is good because it is educational, but I really don't think that people only play *Brain Training* for that purpose. Rather, *Brain Training* became popular because they enjoy themselves seeing how they are progressing and how their hidden talents are revealed by their scores. When it comes to *Wii Music*, I simply thought it was great fun to be able to play with a musical instrument. But, for that matter, I have never thought that education couldn't be entertaining. I wish that the education I received during my schooldays could have been much more fun than it was. From that perspective, I'm trying to expand the fun nature of things. Once again, I am not intending to make anything educational, but if the resulting software is taken as educational, that's OK. I might seem to be making some unwritten proposal to the teachers around the world – but it depends on the people in the academic field whether or not they will make use of that.

What's your response to some of the poor reviews *Wii Music* has received in the gaming press? Did you expect it to be misunderstood?
Well, we have just come to the stage where some people have played *Wii Music* for the first time, and in most cases they are still playing by themselves, but I think there is more to playing games than just playing by yourself. Playing a game by yourself a game with a challenging nature is of course a really important aspect of videogames, but in most videogames there are other aspects, like how you will associate or compare with other players. My hope is of course that a gradually increasing number of people will get access to *Wii Music* and understand its fun nature. I really don't think that it will have the immediate and universal appeal around the world at all [laughs]. I really appreciate that the gaming media has a different view of anything as new as *Wii Music* today – it's simply symbolises how different and unique *Wii Music* is. To tell the truth, I have this big ambition for *Wii Music*, that it can eventually be something very influential so that it might be able to influence what music means in the world.

Is it true that *Wii Music* is the last of the games from your original list of ideas for Wii software?
[Laughs] Yes, it is true that the existing Wii games, including *Wii Music*, were on the top priority list, but there is some other software, of course [laughs], but I cannot talk about it!


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You've covered sports, fitness and now music, all universally appealing subjects. Is it becoming more of a challenge to find new universal themes?
[Considers for a long time] Well, yes, it is challenging to find something universal but, after all, that's my job as I see it. Until the time that I am in a position to tell you the next subject, we can only confirm that we are working on the next *Mario* and the next *Zelda*, etc. In terms of new games, we need to stand with the potential customer's viewpoint. Of course, we have new ideas in mind all the time, but the challenging part is whether they will really be widely appreciated by users.

Is it more difficult to develop games like *Wii Music* or *Wii Fit* than a more traditional game like *Mario* or *Zelda*?
In the case of *Zelda* or *Mario*, as a principle we make a point of using new technology that can create unique new features for them. In the case of finding a brand-new theme that is not traditionally categorised as a game theme, like *Nintendogs* or *Wii Fit*, we of course have to think about what is going to be appealing to the wider audiences. Sometimes new technology emerges that makes us realise that we can tackle a new theme, but as far as my talent goes, it's always the same. What I really try to do all the time is provide customers with something brand new – some new gaming experience. I think it's simply the difference of the focus – am I focusing on technology or on theme? The natural challenge is always the same. As far as my attitude goes, the key point is whether I am enjoying doing what I'm doing or not. That is important – after all, creating something is always a hardship, but, equalling the hardship, if I have the belief I am trying to create something new, that can give me the hope as well as the joy.

"I would be happiest if people looked back and said I was someone who was there when videogaming first started and who was a pioneer up until his dying day"



Nintendo is still quite conservative with its use of the internet, but do you think that you're learning more about how to safely implement it in your games?
That's right, Nintendo has been very careful. Whenever we take advantage of the internet, we want the highest possible safety and security for our users all the time. We have been trying various methods. To take an example from *Wii Music*, we understand that it would be fun if players get the opportunity to share their performances. Maybe it's something like what we've been achieving with the Mii Contest Channel – it's one thing that you can come up with some great new character, but it's adding up to far more entertainment if you can compare your Mii with those from around the world. There are some great possibilities, I believe, with viewing and sharing user-generated content. But, once again, we need to make the appropriate balance. So our challenge continues.

How difficult is it to take consumers who begin gaming through software like *Wii Sports* and *Wii Music* and take them into more sophisticated games? And do you think that's a very important step for Nintendo nowadays?
I think first of all we have to continue to create these new types of games that are going to interest people who otherwise aren't going to be interested in games. That's the first step. In terms of where we go from there, one theory is that you take those people and transition them to the types of game experiences we have all been enjoying for the last 30 years. While there's certainly value in trying to do that, the thing I think is more important is that entertainment itself is something you need to continue to surprise people with. The question then is what can we ourselves, or other game creators, do to make new game experiences that are unique, that will continue to surprise wide audiences of people, whether it's people who have been playing games for a long time, people who are new to games or people who have yet to play games. I think that what we've begun to see with Wii is people have begun to understand videogames, and hopefully they're understanding that anyone can play videogames. While I'm sure some people will transition over to the types of games we've all played for so long, I'm more excited about what Nintendo and all of the developers can do to continue to surprise this now much larger audience.

Do you think we will still be using the Wii Remote and Nunchuk in ten years? Do you hope they'll become some kind of standard that will replace joypads?
One of the challenges we've seen with the videogame industry is that we've come so far with what is now considered the classic videogame controller, when you're so used to using the same thing over and over again over many years, as a creator you run into creative blocks where it's hard to break out of that mould and come up with new ideas. Of course, if I were to say that we were going to change the interface right away in the next generation, the people who have been learning to work with these controllers would be upset. But I would think that somewhere down the road you might find a way to make an even more intuitive type of interface that might make it even easier for people to interact with videogames. I think that at some point in the future we'll probably see some type of change.

Beyond Wii MotionPlus?
That's a good example of how we make improvements of what has become the standard controller and we'll see that evolve and, again, we'll likely come to a point where people might run into those creative blocks after they've explored all of the opportunities for that controller. And then we'll move on to another new and different type of controller.

When you one day retire, what do you want to be remembered for?
I often look at the pattern that we've seen with the Japanese manga industry and hope that I can have something like that. If you look at the history of Japanese manga you have the very early manga artists like Osamu Tezuka, who really defined the style and continued to pioneer in that realm and draw new manga and created new styles along the way. I think the other key thing about them is that they continued drawing up until the day they died. I would be happiest if people look back some day and say this is somebody who was there when videogames first started being created and he's somebody who was continually creating new styles of play and was bringing new ideas to games and was a pioneer up until his dying day.

Wii Music

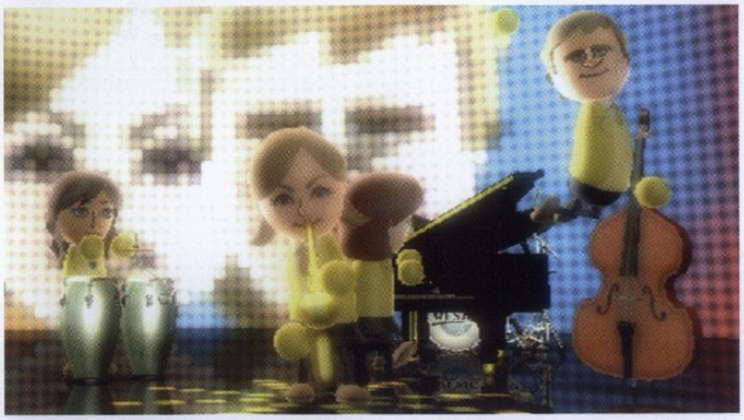
FORMAT: **WII** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** RELEASE: **OUT NOW**



Nintendo can't be content with the Japanese and North American launches of *Wii Music*. On its first four days on sale in Japan, according to Media Create, it sold 92,000 copies, compared with figures like *Mario Kart Wii*'s 594,000 in its first four days and *Wii Fit*'s 254,000 in its first two. In the US, meanwhile, *Wii Music* has a Metacritic rating at the time of writing of just 59. Though Miyamoto has fine ambitions for his latest plaything, public reception doesn't seem to be on his side, so far.

The problem is, of course, that *Wii Music* isn't a game. Miyamoto isn't being arrogant when he's reluctant to compare it to the likes of *Guitar Hero*, *Rock Band* or even Nintendo's own *Rhythm Tengoku*. But these challenge-based games are what *Wii Music* will tend to be measured against, despite the crucial difference that it places no stipulations on what players do during a song. The software fills in the blanks between the song's official notes with appropriate tones, leaving it up to the player when to play and in what fashion. To emphasise how players are expected to feel the music and play their own way, each song's note sheet is hidden from view by default.

The result is a sense of looseness and possibility. Well-played improvisations take practice to achieve and are rewarded, naturally, by the quality of the music you're hearing. You're more involved in the music than when playing *Rock Band*, even if you're not actually choosing each note; a strange kind of freedom, but one that's actually very close to the experience of playing live. The greatest way to experience this is with three other players, each taking one of the six parts to each song. It's here that *Wii Music*'s looseness enforces real collaboration in order to make a good sound, and experienced players can easily play with those new to it. While *Rock Band* has the Overdrive mechanic to encourage the band to play together, it's an innate part of *Wii Music*.





The bottom right corner of the screen features notes animated to the beat of the music. As well as marking time, they also indicate transitions to new sections

To achieve this, the music itself has to be archetypal, known to all, simple enough to encourage experimentation and able to be applied to different types of instruments, from rock to orchestral. That's why the playlist is made up of songs like The Entertainer, Frere Jacques and Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go, each rendered in rinky-dink MIDI. They're cheap and exceedingly cheerful, and you've the choice of 66 different instruments to play them with, so you can play a steel drum to Chariots Of Fire or perform a jazz version of Ode To Joy. And as you indulge in such silly experimentation, you start to realise how intricately the songs are constructed, and begin feeling where you can insert your own flourishes, or how you can subvert them.

How long it will regularly be played for is a matter of personal taste. Certainly, *Wii Music*'s infectious and inclusive social side means that it's an easy choice for parties, at least as appealing as *SingStar* or *Guitar Hero*, and probably more so to older generations. Alone, mastering the jam overdubbing mode and understanding the nuances of each instrument can provide long-term self-imposed challenge. But even longevity isn't really relevant to *Wii Music*. It's entertainment software exemplified, bought for the idea of playing together, however infrequently the opportunity to do so actually arises; as disposable and essential as Saturday evening TV – forgotten if you've gone out, impossible to miss when you're in. *Wii Music* is crafted beautifully for the masses. And that means that, somewhere, there's something in it for you.



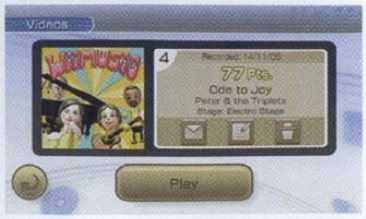
Rattle and strum

Each of *Wii Music*'s 66 instruments is designed to be played in one of four different manners: drums and pianos by holding the Wii Remote and Nunchuk with each hand and making downward strikes (a Balance Board can be employed to act as a kick drum, too); violins by holding the Nunchuk out and sweeping the Remote across; guitars by holding out the Nunchuk and strumming with the Remote; and wind instruments by holding the Remote vertically in both hands and pressing the 1 and 2 buttons. Each method is more sensitive and reactive than might be expected, given the lack of haptic feedback, and features various modifiers to the sound it creates – the volume of wind instruments depends on the angle at which the Remote is held, while the Nunchuk's joystick bends notes in the guitar mode.



***Wii Music* includes three party games – Mii Maestro, a disposable (but also scored) conducting game; Handbell Harmony, a co-op game about hitting notes; and Pitch Perfect, a quiz about recognising pitches and notes**





Each part in a song can be played in sequence by a single player, slowly building it up track by track and providing a considerable challenge to get to sound just right. Laying down the first track is most tricky, because you don't hear others to play to. Once a song is completed, it can be saved as a video, after having rated your own performance on a one-to-100 scale and creating a CD cover for it, and then sent to friends via WiiConnect24

"Gears Of War 2 will blow you away"
Zoo

"Gears Of War 2 is the definition of a must-have game"
X-360 Magazine, 10/10

"The finest action game of the year"
Gamesmaster, 95%

"Yet another huge hit on Xbox 360"
Daily Star

"Bigger, better, bloodier - get some!"
FHM

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The Sun

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Jump in.



XBOX 360 LIVE





Touch and go



Apple's iPhone and its iPod touch companion are making the fortunes of some developers, but why aren't the games as alluring as the hardware?



'Intangible' is a word that comes up a lot when the first crop of iPhone and iPod Touch games are being discussed, and it's hard to see that as a good sign. Despite Apple's extended hot streak in the digital marketplace, despite the David and Goliath goodwill, despite the instantaneous success of the App Store as a money-making machine, there's something indistinct and gently underwhelming about a lot of iTunes' more playful output to date. IPhone games aren't bad, many of them just aren't terribly memorable: you may touch them, shaking, prodding, jabbing and tilting your way through marble runs, trivia quizzes and side-scrolling shooters, but they often fail to have any lasting impact in return. Ironically, the underlying problem is something it's hard to put your finger on precisely.

That's not to say iPhone games aren't selling: conservative estimates suggest App Store revenues run at a million dollars per day. As a single example, *Super Monkey Ball* took a mere three weeks to shift 300,000 copies – despite featuring controls so poorly calibrated that it's virtually unplayable. It looks the part, and perhaps that's enough for now, but it's far from the only proof that people are willing to buy games for the platform.

But just what are people buying? In among the 1,200 titles available at the time of writing, there are some promising distractions and a handful of quiet gems, but there's also a lot of misguided, buggy or merely bland offerings – unbalanced puzzlers, slippery kart racers and the odd app that won't even load half the time. The sales figures and the hype suggest that the world of handheld gaming is in line for a very fashionable makeover, yet so far Apple's iPhone has struggled to find its own voice. That contradiction, along with the audible mutterings over just how seriously Apple is taking games, suggests some interesting questions about the platform's future. Why have so many of the initial releases been so disposable? What are the particular challenges iPhone developers face as the platform matures? And where will iPhone eventually fit in the handheld market?



Gary Penn, internal development manager at 'digital toy' maker Denki, is just one observer who isn't yet convinced by iPhone gaming. "The initial iPhone games line-up is rank," he declares. "There's nothing I want to play for even a few minutes. It's as if no one cares about the device or the medium. Everyone's so busy clambering over each other to make a mark before the paying players calm down and stop buying any old rubbish."



The most obvious problem facing developers is that the iPhone hardware was not originally designed as a gaming device, a fact that brings *Super Monkey Ball*'s problems sharply into focus. *Monkey Ball*'s irritations are almost entirely down to its controls – with an interface created for the touchscreen PDA market, the iPhone has no buttons, D-pads or sticks. This means that, no matter how good









Super Monkey Ball's poor tilt control and lack of deadzone make it a study in frustration. A shame, as it's packed with levels

your tilt control is, you're missing a crucial piece of haptic feedback from the start.

"The fact is that motion and touch control are no replacement for a D-pad or analogue joystick," admits **Paul Farley**, the managing director of Tag Games, an established mobile platforms developer. "Games that have been designed for those traditional input methods do not always translate well to these less accurate methods of control. A number of games feature onscreen buttons or pads, and unfortunately this rather inelegant solution seems to be the best approach. The most important element that this solution lacks is the tactile physicality of depressing a button and feeling it move. You simply don't have that with a flat screen, and as such knowing when you've pressed and when you haven't causes big problems."

"Like any new input system, it's going to take a while for the controls to mature as people develop a standard language of interaction with the device"





Ivan Villavicencio (top) and Andy Qua have very different styles. Villavicencio's *KuGon* is an austere brainteaser, while Qua's *Cube Runner* is a twitch-based flight game

In return, the range of quirky inputs the iPhone does possess may ultimately be red herrings for developers. "Like any new input system, it's going to take a while for the controls to mature as people develop a standard language of interaction with the device," suggests **Simon Oliver** of Handcircus, a micro-studio that is soon to release its first game, the colourful platformer *Rolando*. "There's a lot of experimentation at the moment, with wildly different control schemes being created, but I imagine in a year or so we'll start to see more games using standardised controls."

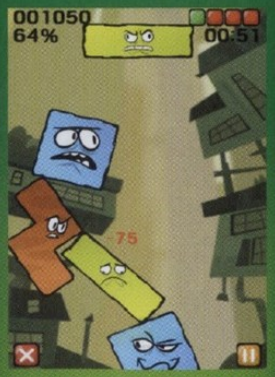
Control is far from the only hardware issue developers have to deal with. Unlike most handheld gaming consoles, graphics capabilities weren't necessarily the first concern when Apple designed its hardware, and the results are the subtle performance problems pointed out by *Trism* creator Steve Demeter, who claims that its 3D rendering capability lacks finesse, making it more difficult to use than PSP's or DS's. Then there's the notoriously short battery life, not built for long gaming sessions, which will be a key factor in shaping the kind of titles that get made. "We're very much coming at iPhone from a mobile gaming perspective, so our games are designed to be ten- to 20-minute snacks," says Farley. "Therefore battery life is unlikely to be an issue for us. There has to be a compromise when cramming so much into such a small device and in this case the battery is probably the weakest element. That said, many other high-end phones have the same problem."

Device aside, there are also problems emerging with how games are purchased. The App Store is accessed through iTunes which, like the iPhone itself, was not built with games as a first priority. "I'm very much in favour of the open platform and the ability for everyone to get their content out there, no matter how small their game is," says Oliver. "Obviously that abundance of titles is going to make it hard for good content to stand out. As it grows, the App Store will need continuous refinement – browsing is already a cumbersome process."

Another limiting factor inherited from iTunes is pricing: it simply isn't possible to charge over £10 for a game in an environment where the traditional price point is 79p – and price inevitably has an effect on dev budget. "The question isn't whether iPhone gamers want to play those types of game but whether they are prepared to pay to play them," says Farley, who notes that many developers are already slashing

Hello Moco

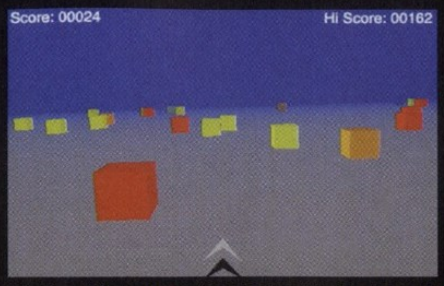
If the iPhone lacks firstparty leadership more than anything else, help may be on hand in the form of ngmoco. Founded by Neil Young, who previously worked for EA's small game label, Blueprint, the company is now commissioning, financing and publishing independent iPhone games and has pitched itself as the 'spiritual firstparty' for the device. Its mission statement is to make 'fun, beautiful, and compelling' titles, and while its initial releases, *MazeFinger* and *Topple*, both have fairly short entertainment half-lives, their presentation is certainly slick. Having signed up Simon Oliver's ambitious *Rolando*, and with a pledge to release free games along with 'premium' titles, ngmoco may yet become the first company that truly understands how an iPhone game should play.



Topple is Ngmoco's charismatic take on Jenga, but longevity is a problem



Harmonix staff may choke on their skinny lattes when they play Tapulous' *Tap Tap Revenge* music title, but at least the game's free



Cube Runner's focus on gameplay rather than gimmicks, plus sound controls and a simple aesthetic, keep it high in the top downloads

their prices to get on the crucial best-seller lists. "For the smaller developers it's going to be a huge risk to spend PSP- or DS-sized budgets on a title that retails at £2.99. That's a lot of units to sell to break even."

Ultimately, however, many of the problems with the patchy early software can be traced back to one central issue: there are no firstparty titles on the iPhone, and not much to indicate that Apple is hugely engaged with gaming. While Penn argues that "Apple would be mad not to care about games and supporting the iPhone as a platform," he adds that, at the moment, it's clear that the device "could really do with a Nintendo to support it."

Given Apple's history with digital downloads, its low-key approach is understandable – Steve Jobs didn't need to write any songs to provide content for iTunes' launch, after all – yet it suggests that the company may not entirely appreciate that games are very different from the music and movie businesses, and a new platform, particularly one as eccentric as the iPhone, means thirdparties require a lot of initial guidance. Without the likes of *Brain Training* and *Yoshi's Touch & Go*, we may still be seeing racing games with touchscreen steering wheels and tragically literal ports of console titles cropping up on DS, rather than the lateral-thinking side-stories and nebulous lifestyle software which fits so well. Almost every console launch in history has had a firstparty showing the way – outlining the vision for the platform, while providing a showcase for the hardware. Perhaps much of the muddle and disappointment of the current App Store line-up may be down to developers doing their research and development in public.

When you combine that with Apple's tendency towards secrecy, a picture emerges of a somewhat bewildering device with an equally bewildering submissions and review scheme. "It's very much a one-way street," suggests **Andy Qua**, the developer of *Cube Runner*, one of the more popular free iPhone games. "In my experience, Apple communicates as little as possible with the outside world – and even less so to external developers, bar a few exceptions. You write your application, upload it to the iTunes store and then wait until you get the 'available' or 'rejected' email. You have no idea of how long the review process will take or what the criteria are. There's a lot of frustration on various forums about the length of time it takes to get reviewed, and the fact that a developer could spend a lot of time on something only for it to be rejected because it doesn't match some unknown criteria. This isn't a good way of getting developers to invest time and develop for your platform."

IPlagiarism

While the exact criteria employed in Apple's submissions programme remain mysterious, guarding against intellectual property theft may not necessarily be very high on the list, with Noah Witherspoon's free *Tetris* clone *Tris* being removed from the App Store only after Apple was contacted by The Tetris Company itself (an official iPhone version of *Tetris* has since been published by EA). While the App Store is currently home to various *Bejewelled* and *Snake* knock-offs, the fact that there hasn't been more in the way of visible plagiarism so far could be an indicator that either Apple is now taking the matter more seriously rather than relying on the YouTube model of post-release flagging by IP holders, or that those IP holders themselves are increasingly vigilant.

Competition time

While it's obvious that the iPhone's initial line-up has suffered from the absence of firstparty titles, Apple's treatment of a handful of application developers suggests there may also be benefits in its relatively hands-off approach to games. Since the launch of the App Store in July, several reports have emerged of non-game applications being de-listed or rejected in cases where their functionality duplicates features of iTunes itself, the most widely covered incident so far being the case of the podcast client Podcaster. "Let's be clear: forbidding 'duplication of functionality' is forbidding competition," argues technology blogger **John Gruber**, who goes on to suggest that such practices will hardly encourage talented developers to embrace the App Store as a viable platform in the long term.

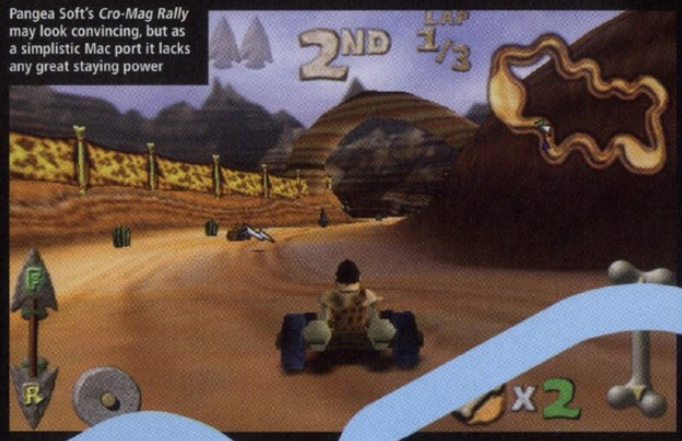


De Blob highlights a trend for an iPhone title to promote a console game. The top-down view works, but it lacks the splattery charm of the original

A lot of the developers we spoke to echoed these sentiments. Others, however, have had markedly different experiences, being quickly flagged as selected vendors and having in-house representatives assigned to shepherd them through the submissions procedure. But that simply serves to support the idea that, being, there's something that from the outside appears arbitrary, insulated and mysterious about the submissions programme itself.

Despite these reservations, the developers we spoke to all share the same opinion that there's a definite future for games on the iPhone, and have enjoyed working with it so far. "The iPhone continually surprises me by how capable it is," says Qua. "The basic engine for *Cube Runner* took about two days to write, and I didn't expect it to perform even half as well, going on my previous mobile 3D experiences."

Having worked on other phone platforms, Farley agrees: "It's been a very positive experience. There is no doubt that the iPhone has already changed the marketplace. Allowing applications to utilise functions such as the



Pangea Soft's *Cro-Mag Rally* may look convincing, but as a simplistic Mac port it lacks any great staying power



Simon Oliver of Handcircus is thoroughly optimistic about the iPhone's future, and his first title, *Rolando*, may be one of the first platform-defining titles

camera, GPS and connectivity is a major step forward from the restrictive nature of the Java implementation on most other phones. Unlike the N-Gage, it isn't a technology platform shared across a number of devices – it is a single device. This is vital for consumer understanding and avoids additional device fragmentation. We have enough of that already in mobile gaming."

And some developers are making a lot of money, too. *Trism*, Demeter's first title, has made a quarter of a million dollars since its release in July. Demeter has quit his day job and now runs a small studio working on five games. Such success stories were unknown in mobile phone development until the launch of Apple's handheld. "We have already seen that iPhone users consume far more content than currently seen across the traditional mobile phone market," says Farley. "When that's combined with a 70 per cent revenue share for the content producer, it means that iPhone as a standalone mobile platform is almost certainly the most profitable for the small developer."

"IPhone users consume far more content than the traditional mobile phone market. It's almost certainly the most profitable platform for the small developer"

And it's games like *Trism* that may ultimately point the way to the platform's future. Those comparisons to DS and PSP may effectively be part of the problem, raising false expectations for the device – expectations probably not held by the iPhone's more casual audience for whom gaming is at best an intriguing bonus – but also leading developers in the wrong direction. Of the initial line-up of games, it's quirky puzzle games like *Trism* and Tapulous' free music title *Tap Tap Revenge* that have seemed most at home, while more complex offerings like the Mac port *Cro-Mag Rally* by Pangea Soft, or the reworking of *De Blob*, seem out of place. The secret to developing for the iPhone may be to ignore the hype and the hardware, and treat it like a mobile phone after all.

"I think the fundamental question we should be asking as developers is not 'what kind of game do we want to make for this device?' but 'what type of game does the mobile gamer want to play?'" argues Farley. "The iPhone is still ultimately a phone, and therefore it is unlikely many users will purchase it with just gaming in mind. They will play on the move for short periods of time and the early signs are that games designed with this in mind will be successful. Hopefully this gives those of us who have spent years building mobile games a bit of an early advantage over the other studios."

Ivan Villavicencio, founder of developer IVRealms, agrees: "The iPhone is primarily a communication device. The DS and PSP are portable gaming devices. For the gaming industry it's easy to try and fit the same old 'match three' game and box it up for the iPhone. This is what we are seeing now with the first wave of games. But the truly unique gems will be the games that think outside the box and incorporate what the iPhone has to offer."

And there are already signs that designers might be thinking about the iPhone in more creative ways. Realtime Associates, a developer with a history stretching back to the Intellivision, is currently working on an interactive audio mystery game called *Soul Trapper* which, utilising the iPhone's iPod capacities, would be difficult to see existing on any other platform, while Oliver's forthcoming *Rolando* seems likely to bring a much-needed injection of style to the App Store's generally more functional offerings, while its publisher, EA vet Neil Young's new firm ngmoco, is positioning itself as the 'spiritual firstparty' for Apple's platform (see 'Hello moco'). More tangibly, Demeter's company Demiforce is creating Onyx Online, a free client that will allow developers to create standardised leaderboards, friends lists and achievements,

Knowingly undersold

The low price of the SDK, combined with the heady rush of having their work available on iTunes, has lead a large number of developers to release games entirely free of charge. The presence of advertisement titles like Carling's iPint suggests at least one potential future for the platform, but many micro-studios are using free titles as a way of providing a demo, even if Apple's rules expressly forbid any kind of up-selling which might point the player to the paid version. As with the full-priced apps, the figures are often astonishing: *Tap Tap Revenge* saw over a million downloads in its first month.

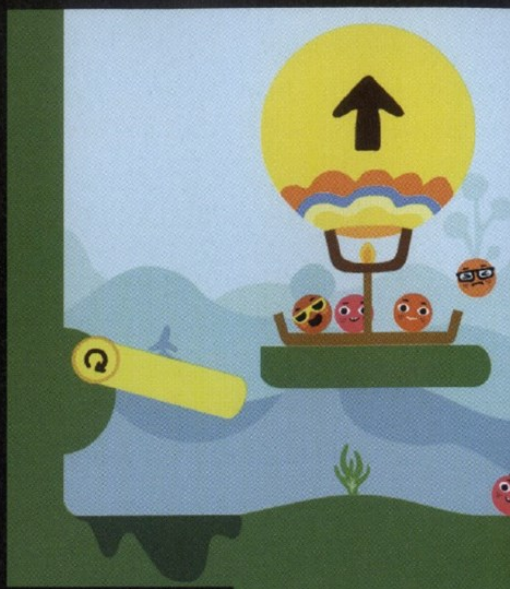
IPod games

While iPhone gaming continues to be defined by micro-studio output, the venerable iPod has a quietly growing roster from established companies, with EA, Namco and even Square Enix making their presence felt. Although the battery life is far more fit for purpose, iPod titles succeed or fail on a control scheme built around the click wheel and select button. Popcap's *Peggle* provides the snuggest fit for the hardware, closely followed by Harmonix's *Phase*, a thinly veiled prototype for the developer's automatic note-tracking software, capable of turning any iTunes library into a series of *Amplitude*-lite courses. Also worth a look is the strangely unmusical *Song Summoner: The Unsung Heroes*, a Square Enix turn-based RPG, which manages to provide a solid, if slightly bland, campaign mode. Less dependable is the port of *Sonic The Hedgehog*, a predictable failure to combine medium and message which is probably best left untouched.

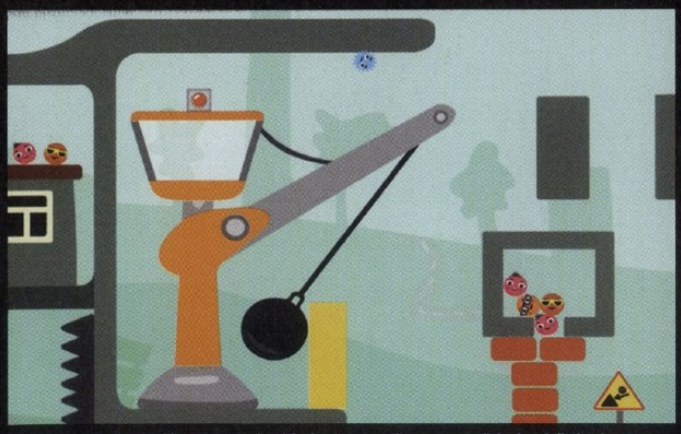




Phase (top) turns your music into levels, while *Song Summoner* turns it into traditional Japanese fantasy archetypes



Rolando, with over 30 levels, should be an ambitious offering. The iPhone battery may prove its true end-of-level boss, however



Rolando may look quite like *LocoRoco*, but it's shaping up to be an accomplished and distinctive game. The controls have seen many iterations – a promising sign, given the lack of any iPhone standardisation



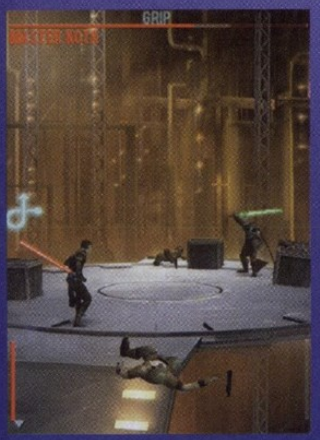
hopefully bringing to the muddy world of iPhone development a little of the same clarity Steam has brought to the PC market.

Villavicencio ultimately puts the key to success with Apple itself. "It is really going to come down to Apple's support of legitimate developers, enforcement of quality, and the curbing of tenuous Apps that will determine the iPhone's place," he says, suggesting that the platform's great promise as an unregulated, open environment where anyone can make a game is also part of the problem.

Famously, Apple entering the videogame space is something that's been keeping Microsoft, Sony and even Nintendo awake at night for the last five years. It's telling that, despite the financial miracles the App Store has wrought, there remains little for these more traditional console manufacturers to be scared of. Apple has provided a platform, but it's yet to convincingly take control of it, and seems happy to let it define itself. And as far as hardware's concerned, the thought of Cupertino's aesthetes bolting an ugly thumbstick on to one of their glinting slivers of sexy futurism any time soon is hard to sustain. With the iPod, Apple changed the music industry, but it only had to look at how music was packaged and sold – it didn't need to tell artists how to write songs. With the iPhone, it finds itself in the opposite situation: the sales channel is churning out produce, and people are snapping it up – but there are real signs that without the necessary guidance a lot of designers aren't entirely sure what to make. The result is that a sizeable amount of them are making anything and everything, clogging the marketplace in the process. A company as forward-thinking as Apple must surely be wondering how much of a future there is in that proposition.

Diamonds in the rough

Despite the white noise of the App Store, a handful of standout games are already beginning to emerge



STAR WARS: THE FORCE UNLEASHED

Publisher: THQ

Pretty yet slight, *The Force Unleashed* can at least take credit for cramming the original game's entire plot on to the iPhone. An on-rails trace 'em up, touchscreen Force powers are nicely handled, but the combat is simplistic and, at around 50 minutes for an entire playthrough, there isn't much to get to grips with.



TRISM

Publisher: Demiforce LLC

A block-matching puzzler with a twist – the angle of new blocks depends on which way up the iPhone is being held – *Trism* has quickly become the star of the micro-studio scene. Huge sales figures are a testament to a refined and addictive central mechanic, and online leaderboards and achievements make this the title other iPhone games will have to live up to.



KUGON

Publisher: IVRealms

Part maths puzzler, part trivia quiz and part Sudoku, *KuGon* somehow remains surprisingly original. Its austere presentation and focus on cold, hard arithmetic skills may make it seem a little too much like work for some players, but for those willing to put in the effort a mature and elegant game awaits. Those interested in testing the waters can try out *KuGon Lite* for free.



DIZZY BEE

Publisher: Igloo Games

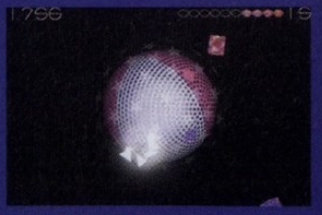
Dizzy Bee may look like clip art, but it's bright, cheery and surprisingly challenging. Tilting Dizzy through mazes is well suited to the platform, and onscreen text that rotates with the handset is indicative of the care with which this has been put together – understandable considering designer Nathan Hunley is a DigiPen graduate with experience making games in both Japan and the US.



SPORE ORIGINS

Publisher: EA

Focusing on the Cell phase of Will Wright's evolution sim, *Spore Origins* plays like a gaudy cover version of *Flow* with a primitive creature editor tacked on. The ability to upload organisms to the Sporepedia is a nice touch, and the range of creature parts make for some quietly engaging choices, but often-wayward controls make this intelligent brand extension rather than intelligent design.



NEWTONICA

Publisher: Fieldsystem

If you're looking for a title that truly understands how best to use the iPhone's touch controls in an innovative manner, the deceptively primitive *Newtonica* fits the bill. Consisting of little more than a stripy sphere which must be rotated to match the colours of incoming meteors, Fieldsystem's game is simple yet demanding, with an interface so obvious it requires no explanation.


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An audience with...

Matthew Jeffery

EA's recruitment evangelist explains why he's got his sights set beyond the world of videogames in the search for a new generation of staff

As the game industry expands, the audience that plays games becomes broader and the craft of making games becomes more sophisticated, developers and publishers have found the task of attracting new talent a growing challenge. In fact, many industry leaders have recognised that game production is facing a recruitment crisis, with too few skilled graduate programmers coming out of UK universities to satisfy demand. As a result, recruiters are having to look outside the traditional avenues of computer science students that only ever wanted to make games, to women that might never have considered a career in the field, and into other industries, from film to financial services.

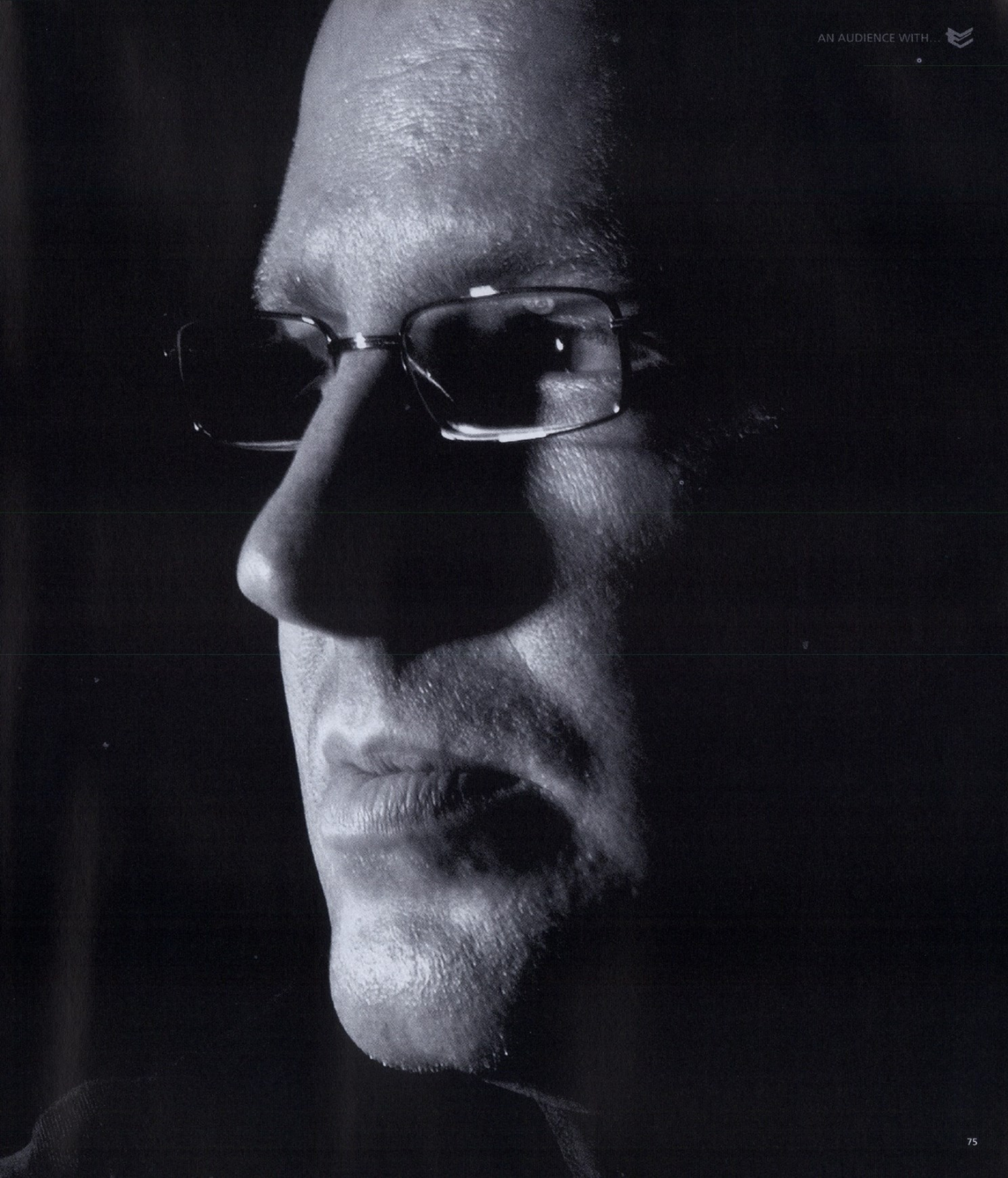
As its global head of talent brand, **Matthew Jeffery** is in charge of promoting the idea of working at Electronic Arts, and in videogames in general, to these fresh pools of potential employees. But he faces a big challenge – perceptions of working in the game industry range from overwork and bad management, as epitomised by 2004's infamous EA Spouse blog, to stereotypes of companies purely staffed by introverted and awkward young males. We sat down with him to discuss EA's recruitment strategy, the effects of anti-EA chatter on the internet, and the possibilities newcomers to the industry can bring to games.

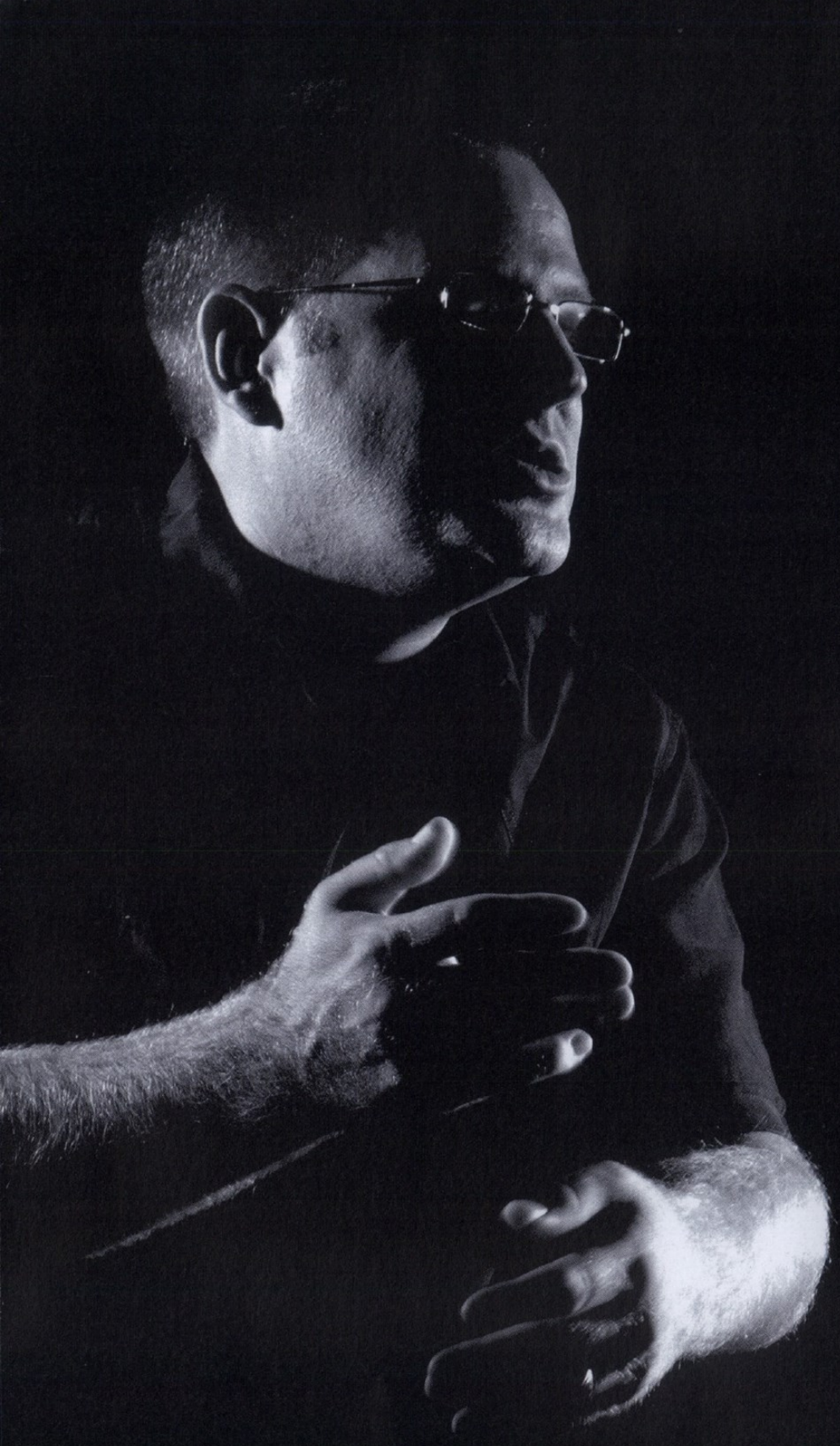
How have you recognised this crisis?
Well, what we recognise is that the experienced talent pool – the people that have established skills in the industry – are becoming in short supply as the entertainment industry grows. With the convergence of film and game and mobile, we're all competing for the same talent. So, how can we continue to grow across the world and bring in new talent, and not have to compete all the time with salaries or promise extra things in terms of career development? The graduate market is pretty critical, so we're convincing graduates that they can enter the industry with the skills they have and progress up. It could be persuading women to come into the games industry and show them what career development they can have. That can be a challenge, because there's that perception of the industry as being quite male and geeky. But with the advent of casual gaming that's not the industry we work in today. Some of the senior leaders at EA – Fiona Sperry at Criterion Games, Kathy Vrabeck, president of the casual gaming division, and Nancy Smith, who leads *The Sims*. So, instead of competing with gaming competitors, let's reach outside the industry, attract more graduates and females and people from industries we haven't recruited from before – could be film, public sector or financial services. Interestingly, in the UK, some of our most recent programmer hires were from the Ministry of Defence in missile programming. Their knowledge of AI programming is superb. A few years ago, if you had asked whether we'd be hiring from the public sector, I'd have said probably not. We hadn't thought of that. But with the technology we have, it's pretty exciting that we can reach out and attract people from different industries into EA.

> "Some of our most recent hires were from the Ministry of Defence in missile programming. Their knowledge of AI programming is superb"

How do game industry salaries, benefits and working conditions compare to the expectations of people outside it?
One of the perceptions of the games industry is that its benefits and pay may not be as advanced, and that's been a communication issue. I would say that EA covers the key benefits compared to some of the other industries that we're recruiting from, and if you take film, it's mainly made up of contractors, who obviously only get a set fee and none of these benefits. In terms of salary our biggest challenge is with the experienced talent pool contracting, because we have worries that someone accepting an offer from EA may get offers from other companies as well and leverage their salary upwards with that. That leads to salary inflation. Again, these are things that we're learning, as well as career development. How they receive training and opportunities to be promoted stands us in a better position in the future.

Is it still the case that people will work for little to get a foothold in the industry?
A few years ago some games companies saw graduates as cheap labour, but now the point is that a graduate is the future of your company and you have to pay them a good salary and make sure they're incentivised to go forward. The key thing is competing and making sure they don't go off into film or mobile or anything like that. But in games now we have such technological advancements that we're able to compete with the likes of film. A few years ago, people in the film industry perhaps frowned and thought they wouldn't want to work with the PS2's memory limitations to make the visual effects they create in film. But now we have people from film volunteering to come across to the game industry because they can see that on 360, PS3 or PC they're able to bring across the





quality of work and effects, and are presented with new challenges, like realtime and multi-camera work. That's all attractive. These are pretty exciting times.

But is that good for games in the long run? Do these people have a knowledge of and passion for what games represent? Well, bringing in people from other industries gives us different perspectives and will take our industry forward. Take film – go back to when it was on the technological curve, from Jason And The Argonauts through to Star Wars, Terminator 2 and to Toy Story. But today, a lot of people in film are saying about Transformers: 'Great film, but a lot of that has been seen in the past'. In terms of creativity and pushing their talents they're seeing games and thinking: 'Wow, there are a lot of exciting challenges there'. Even people from public services or consumer goods companies, they're maturing our industry at a faster pace, and that's great for gaming.

Have Wii and DS changed attitudes of candidates from outside the industry? Definitely. We're starting to see more females wanting to work in gaming. We want to reflect our games with our workforce, which means we're encouraging more ethnic diversity and more females, and that has started to show in our games. With DS and Pogo.com – short, sharp, fun games – people who wouldn't have wanted to work on more hardcore games are realising: 'Wow, these are great, I'd like to work on these'. It's great that casual gaming is taking off, new audiences are being attracted and these people are realising that they can make fun family entertainment for all. The interesting thing is that there are a number of countries we are recruiting in, India for example, which is a huge area for potential growth for us. But some of the parents there think that the games industry is all about shoot 'em ups, and now they're starting to learn that there is family entertainment and educational software that's breaking those misconceptions.

Do you see much potential in looking at user-generated content and web application creators for new recruits? Yes – in *Spore*, for example, we're seeing people making great creatures, and in *LittleBigPlanet* you can see who could become a level designer. These are key for us as recruiters looking at who is relevant to EA, who could create a difference. Even for Facebook, there are some great applications and we're looking at them and trying to make contact and bring them into EA.

Do you think such people want that? Many indie types view EA as a kind of monster. I think the perception of EA in the industry is

changing, especially with John Riccitiello looking at the EA model and focusing on making studios into citystates and becoming a lot more creative company with new IP. We're seeing a lot of people in the industry talking about that. We saw at E3 John Carmack saying that he would never have considered working with the evil empire, but now he's partnering with us with *Rage*. The key thing is with these indie developers is that if they want a hit game and the support and marketing budgets we have, they should talk with us.

Those perceptions have been set in part by EA Spouse. You worked at EA in recruitment at that time – how did that affect attitudes to working at EA?
The whole thing about work-life balance is that it happens over all industries. I recruit from film at the moment, and today, just as then, they have crunch periods at the end of projects. I have friends in financial services who were working phenomenal hours. Within the game industry, we've been maturing, we have a greater knowledge of what it takes to make games, how we can understand how to lock down game design at an early stage and plan effective schedules right up to release date. All this provides us with a balance to affect the number of hours people are working.

But, actually, EA Spouse was about long crunch being built in to project schedules, that it was part of how EA made games. Is that in any way still the case?
With EA Spouse we learned a number of new things, and the key for us is that we've locked the process to ensure that we have that fully defined process from start to launch. That's been pretty critical for us. [Pauses to think] Casual gaming, in attracting new people into the industry with shorter, sharper games, is causing different development cycles. These new employees have families and so they're working with a stronger work-life balance. Looking at games with longer development cycles, we're now mature enough to define that process and we're minimising that time of crunch. We have this annual survey called Talk Back, where we poll all staff about their feelings towards EA, and management, and our head of HR, Gabrielle Toledano, has shown that we're making great strides ahead and have a very positive reputation.

How damaging was it to the morale of people at EA and your ability to recruit?
When we were in that initial period, people wanted to talk about it, and we were actively engaged with it in recruitment terms. The author of EA Spouse, Erin Hoffman, came out in the press and said that the situation is a lot more advanced at EA now and said that she was encouraging some of her friends to work at EA. So I think that says a lot.

So, do you think a lead-level programmer or artist can comfortably have a family and kids and a job at EA today?
I would say yes. Many of our staff members have families. Yes, there are periods when they're busier than in their other work times, but it's ensuring across the whole company they have lots of family time. We're hitting that balance and are always seeking ways of improving it.

With Steam, PSN, WiiWare and XBLA allowing small independent teams to create and publish games, does that make it harder for EA to attract such talent?
No, I think it's great that the industry is moving forward and that people have that option. But I think people would rather come in internally to EA with their ideas so that a bigger audience can enjoy their games. Global success requires skills, monetary backing and knowledge of markets. We're finding an increased number of people willing to partner with us through EA Partners and obviously a lot more people applying to us to work internally. We can show that we can bring out original IP. A few years back people could accuse us of sequelitis and paying it safe with film franchises, but now you see *Dead Space, Mirror's Edge* and *Left 4 Dead* which are getting critical acclaim and hopefully attracting new audiences and showing that we're not afraid to take risks on original games.

> "A few years back people could accuse us of sequelitis and paying it safe, but now we're not afraid to take risks on original games"

On sequelitis, you have long-running series like *FIFA* and *Madden*. Can you convince candidates that these jobs are attractive?
There's a whole myth about sequels. A sequel has to differentiate itself from its original to persuade people to buy it, otherwise the franchise could die, so it's a big challenge to produce successful sequels. No one would doubt the strides *FIFA* is taking year on year. When talent sees a successful franchise that's going to have a sustained future, they respect that and want to come on to the team. If they've worked on *FIFA* for several iterations, they have the wider EA to go on to to develop their career.

What do you think of the calibre of students from dedicated game courses?
It depends on the area that the students are coming from. Our graduates with traditional degrees – maths, science, English literature, business studies – not only have more rounded skills but also deeper knowledge and expertise. What we've found with the majority of the games degrees is that they don't go as in-depth into the subject areas. Graduates in games courses struggle to reach the results we look for in our programming tests. The problem then is that if you're asking a graduate to spend three or four years studying and incurring debts and they can't get a job because they can't compete, what do they do? These skills aren't readily transferable. With the sheer number of game courses – over 150 – that's a lot of students.

Has the growth of development in places such as South Korea, Singapore and India affected job markets in Europe and US?
Any game company has to look where the talent pools are and where the most attractive locations are. That can be a financial decision – there's the debate over Montreal, where 37.5 per cent of creative salaries are paid by the government after two years and 40 per cent R&D paid in tax credits. So obviously EA is building up its operations there. We're investing heavily in India, South Korea, Singapore – strong talent pools and emerging markets of gamers mean it makes sense to be there. The effect on the UK recruitment market is that a number of strong candidates want to relocate. Some call it brain drain, but talent is very mobile and they want to work on the best games, and if they want to work in Montreal or Asia then they will do that. That represents challenges to the country they're relocating from, but that's the current position in the marketplace today.

Does EA see itself as having a role in supporting the industry as a whole?
The games industry is one of the most exciting of the entertainment industries to work in. We've got the most growth potential, the most challenges – so we're not promoting that we're a great company to work for but, particularly in the likes of India, Korea, China and Singapore, there's not the knowledge among parents or some students that they can have great careers in the game industry. So we want to get out the message that if you're an engineer, come into the industry. If you're an artist, rather than go into film, come into games. So we see ourselves as benefiting the industry as a whole, not just EA. We're all going to benefit from the growth of our industry.



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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

LittleBigPlanet



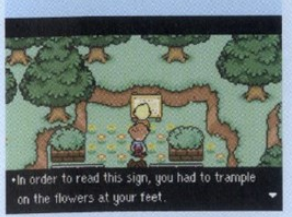
A shaky start, certainly, but the gates are open and we're already seeing how the toolbox can recreate *Gradius*. It bodes well for some more original efforts.
PS3, SONY

Fable II



We just can't stop dancing for the barmaids, playing with doggie and buying up all of the properties in Albion. Then mercilessly upping the rent and growing some horns.
360, MICROSOFT

Mother 3



Yes, we have several Japanese copies lying around, but the chance to finally re-enter Itoi's masterfully skewed world in English was too good to miss.
DS, NINTENDO

Core strength

Is what's under the hood dictating design?



Left 4 Dead, groan-worthy name aside, shows Source at its best – though the similarities between Source games is probably down to Valve's trademark spit and polish on every title

Gears Of War 2 is the best possible advert for Unreal Engine 3. The world is detailed, the space marines are perhaps the chunkiest there have ever been, and some of the effects seem to smash against your television screen. It's one of the best-looking games this generation has seen. Yet... it still looks a little familiar. The crumbling masonry, the blood spatters, the contours on the faces. We've been here before, and we're not talking about *Gears Of War*. What about *Dark Sector*? *Unreal Tournament 3*? Or even the upcoming *Damnation*? Each game screams 'Unreal Engine 3'.

Or does it? This issue we look at *Mirror's Edge*, whose crisp aesthetic and simple primary colours manage to make an FPS world look genuinely fresh. And it's by no means the first to break the mould. A few months ago, *American McGee's Grimm* executed its grimy cartoon world using the same graphics technology, and even further back there's the 2D underwater play of *Undertow*. Unreal Engine 3, it seems, only has to look like *Gears Of War* if you don't have any ideas of your own.

At least the games usually feel different, though. *Fallout 3* may crank the Gamebryo engine to its fullest, and have its own look, but in terms of the game's interactions it feels like playing *Oblivion* again. Not that that's too awful. But now we come to Activision, and the proprietary engine first used in *Call Of Duty 4*. The traditional worry in the FPS genre is a prevalence of grey marines and brown corridors, but the worry that *Call Of Duty: World at War* and *Quantum Of Solace* exemplify is homogenisation of interaction.

Both games feel similar. Both have guns that are similar in form and function. Both have similarly linear levels spiced with the odd set-piece. You could re-skin *QOS* and call it *Call Of Duty: Solo Undercover* and no one would be any the wiser. So can all of the good things those two games manage be put down to the strength of their foundations?

It's tempting to say that they can. And the flipside is that when those games have their lulls, you're thinking of the design of *COD4*. Both arguably owe a solid base and their best moments to feeling like a year-old game, and neither of them can break entirely free of it. *Modern Warfare*? It's not pretty.



82 **Left 4 Dead** 360, PC

84 **Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts** 360

86 **Gears Of War 2** 360

88 **Fallout 3** 360, PC, PS3

90 **Call Of Duty: World At War** 360, PC, PS3

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92 **Mirror's Edge** 360, PC, PS3

93 **Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning** PC



94 **007: Quantum Of Solace** 360, PC, PS3, WII

95 **Tomb Raider: Underworld** 360, DS, PC, PS2, PS3, WII

96 **Guitar Hero: World Tour** 360, PS3, WII

97 **Animal Crossing: City Folk** WII

97 **Ninjatown** DS

98 **Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3** 360, PC

98 **Manhunt 2** PS2, PSP, WII

99 **Silent Hill Homecoming** 360, PS3

99 **Tom Clancy's EndWar** 360, PS3

100 **SOCOM Confrontation** PS3

100 **Valkyria Chronicles** PS3

101 **Need For Speed Undercover** 360, PC, PS3

101 **Shaun White Snowboarding: Road Trip** WII

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



LEFT 4 DEAD

FORMAT: PC, 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: VALVE
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E171, E179, E187







The game's audio hints at the kind of enemies lurking nearby, so you'll always be listening, trying to pick out clues from the ambient noise. The sobbing of a Witch is a particularly ominous sign, joined with an Argento-esque strain of synth as you get closer

They're coming again, screaming down the hallways towards us, clambering through windows, leaping over barricades – a frenzied, wailing wall of savage zombie death. Discretion is the better part of valour, we decide, and stagger backwards into a waiting elevator, firing our last few rounds into the closest zombies as the doors slide shut. Survival, for the moment, seems sure. Then we notice the displaced ceiling tile above. Tense seconds pass as the lift grinds upward, all of us still wordlessly staring at this dark gap, awaiting whatever might burst through. Even when nothing happens – especially when nothing happens – *Left 4 Dead* is an intense experience, cultivating the panic and stress of a survival-horror shooter in multiplayer.

Normally, the giggling distraction of co-op promptly shatters whatever atmosphere developers had intended, but somehow Valve inveigles four players into the horror of its setting. It's a pretty nerve-jangling scrimmage; rare is the game in which, shrill with panic, you find yourself shouting into the microphone: "Oh, Christ! It's a Witch! It's a Witch!" Valve has achieved this through its usual understated storytelling genius – taking something unscripted and dynamic, and seeding it with the right amount of narrative flavour, pacing and spectacle to make it feel





Infected class is selected automatically in versus mode. The Tank's movement is inconsistent with that of its AI cousin, however, meaning survivors can avoid you by standing on a bus

like you are participating in an orchestrated horror set-piece. The director – the AI that determines the flow and placement of zombies – makes every run an unpredictable but cogently dramatic terror. The lulls between swarms seem perfectly timed to unnerve; the swarms between lulls lasting just long enough to reduce your resources and health to almost nothing.

> Valve has taken something unscripted and dynamic, and seeded it with the right amount of narrative flavour, pacing and spectacle

There are, on release, only four scenarios to play through, and though their varied settings make for different arenas of combat, each follows a similar beat. On normal difficulty, should you survive, a scenario lasts a little over an hour, broken into five segments which see the survivors fight their way between safe-houses before a climactic showdown and, ultimately, rescue. It is difficult to ignore the fact that this is a slight offering, even when you consider the degree to which it lends itself to replay. Nonetheless, what there is has been excellently crafted. Movement is tight and responsive, the feel of weapon fire suitably shocking and cruel, and the result of each blast more than satisfies the grindhouse remit for splatter. Environments have clearly been pored over – every one a creepy homage to horror films past, from the urban nightmare that precedes the ascent of Mercy Hospital, to the cold, rural desolation of the Blood Harvest chapter. Visually, the Source engine performs a crisp and economical job, but it's upstaged by the inspired audio design. The creak of gantries, the rattle of water through piping, the sigh of wind or the rustle of corn – Valve has managed to imbue all these things with a powerful foreboding.

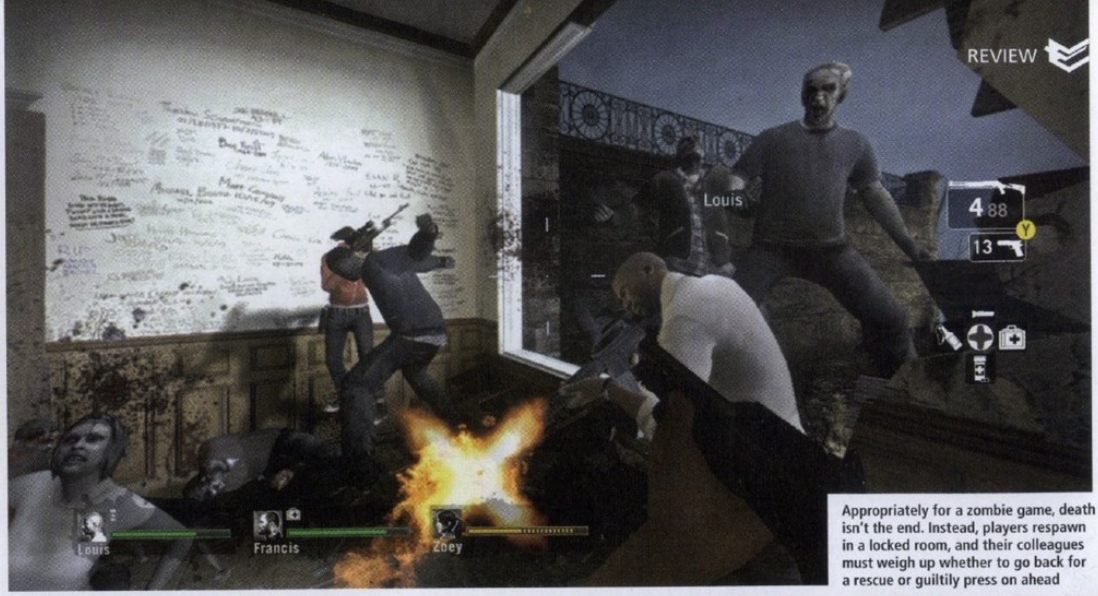


Sometimes you'll make it through a terrifying onslaught when all looked lost. Other times you'll die just as safety seems imminent. The drama of both is thoroughly rewarding

Most of the time, Valve's level design does a fine job of convincing the player that the near-linear route you take is a natural choice among many possible paths, but occasionally the illusion of a much larger environment proves disorienting. This can easily mean death, as lingering invites further waves of zombies, and ammunition and health are sparsely distributed, necessitating speedy progress. Fortunately, Valve has lavished a good deal of automatic dialogue upon the survivors – alerting you and your teammates to the presence of ammunition, or pointing out the correct route to take, as well as simply adding character.

Of course, the worry is that the game might not work with less than co-operative co-op partners, as players are only really effective when together, covering every angle. Although the common-or-garden zombie is of little threat, it is easy to be





Appropriately for a zombie game, death isn't the end. Instead, players respawn in a locked room, and their colleagues must weigh up whether to go back for a rescue or guiltily press on ahead





Light and dark are used to great effect, not least because your gun has a torch which cuts a cold beam into the shadows, begging to be filled with some sudden horrible vision. Just don't point it at a Witch

overwhelmed by their numbers and pinned to the spot, making you easy prey to one of the deadlier enemies (see 'They're coming to get you, Barbara'). Several of these can take you out of commission almost instantly, requiring others to shoot you free and pull you to your feet. Inevitably, you will have to return the favour if you want to keep their fourth gun handy. That's the stick, but Valve offers a bumper crop of carrots too in the form of competitive co-op post-match accolades and Achievements that should keep even the most self-obsessed by the side of their teammates.

Co-ordination is even more important in versus mode, which sees one team take on the role of the zombies. Barely employing any of the same skills required for a successful survivor run, mastery of the zombie horde is all to do with placement: individual lives, rather than being preciously guarded, are quickly thrown away as distractions to blindside the opposing team to your actual plan. Infected players control only special zombies who, dropped into the game as ghostly observers, must fly to some unseen location before spawning in. The capabilities of the infected aren't as intuitive as those of the human team – compared to the hair-trigger responsiveness of the survivors, control is more idiosyncratic and, while that extended learning curve is welcome, it's a little jarring that your abilities don't always match those of the AI-controlled infected.

If versus looks a little slack in places, however, then it's only in comparison to the astounding tautness of the rest of the game. Even in a season packed with multiplayer treats, and despite the relative lightness of its content, *Left 4 Dead* stands among the very best that online gaming has to offer. Certainly, few games have left us as wound up, and though this sensation will inevitably dull with familiarity, credit must go to Valve for making an online game which so involves players in its horror. We'd hope to be playing *Left 4 Dead* for a long time to come – if our nerves can take it. **[9]**



Often, the automatic dialogue pre-empts your own: when your reticule wavers over a particularly nasty enemy, the shout will go out before you can speak into your mic – a valuable feature when playing with the voice-chat averse

They're coming to get you, Barbara



Joining the swarms of infected are special classes of zombie. Hunters pounce great distances to pin players to the ground, while Smokers wrench them off into the dark, garrotting unwary survivors with long fleshy tongues. If ensnared, you'll have to hope your friends are nearby to blast the offending deadhead. The bloated Boomer will vomit on players, covering them in a blinding goop that instantly attracts swarms of zombies. Tanks, meanwhile, are gristle mountains that deal out and take a lot of damage. By far the worst are Witches, however, who sit huddled in darkened rooms, crying. They're obviously having a hard time being undead, so try not to upset them any more.



BANJO-KAZOOIE: NUTS & BOLTS

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: RARE PREVIOUSLY IN: E194



On first arrival in Showdown Town, much of the environment is made impassable through green slippery slopes. Since you are restricted to your 'shopping trolley' vehicle when in town, you'll need to beat Grunthilda before you are awarded high-grip wheels which allow you to navigate the inclines



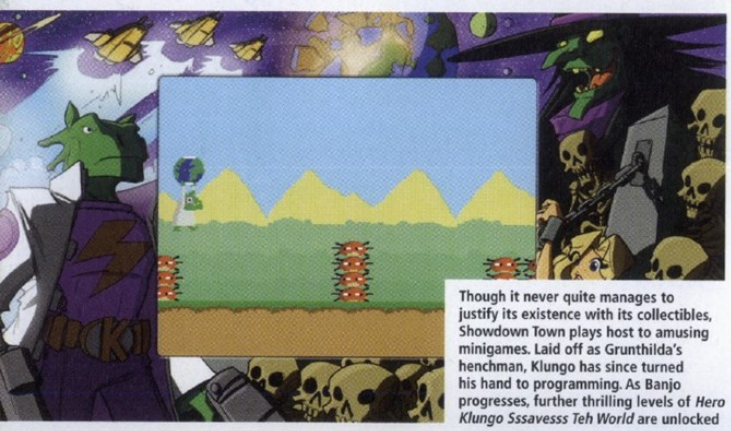
As in previous games, Grunthilda remains a villain in *Nuts & Bolts*, popping up every few levels to offer a boss battle of sorts, completion of which opens up new worlds. Annoyingly, she always cheats – and even more annoyingly tells you that she's cheating. This doesn't make it OK

Nuts & Bolts is little about the platforming of previous *Banjo* games. Under the instruction of the mysterious and aloof Lord Of Games, or LOG, the franchise has evolved into something like a Wacky Races construction kit; an intuitive and powerful vehicle builder that allows you to cobble together wild contraptions that fly and float and everything in between. When it's at its best, the game gives you an obscure challenge and a handful of wheels, panels, spring-loaded boots, egg cannons, wings and propellers, and lets you experiment. Thanks to a robust but delightfully cartoony physics engine, this process invites players to really think about aerodynamics, balance and thrust to create the vehicle which will be optimum for the task. We built a chopper featuring a giant scoop to lift bowling balls on to plinths, spent hours constructing roll-cages in the hope of topping our last score on the ski-jump, and settled on mad swastika-shaped propulsion systems to send a giant armature spinning into a stack of giant dominoes.

The problem is that it takes a long time to unwrap this kernel, buried as it is in a couple of hours of kid-glove challenges, featuring a good deal of dubiously rubber-banded racing and a fussy means of progression necessitating endless trips to a largely superfluous hub-world. Showdown Town, as it is known, is a pleasant enough place and, like much of the game, is beautifully rendered (even if there is something of the kleptomaniac about the jumble of styles and textures that Rare throws down), suffused with the kind of joyous colour we had almost forgotten Xbox 360 could produce. Rare is borrowing from the best – there's much to compare in terms of structure between Showdown Town and *Super Mario Galaxy*'s hub, although the former is substantially bigger. But Rare seems to have missed the point a little – *Galaxy*'s hub was a prettified means to an end, and rarely an obstruction. Nor did it take a full minute to load.



Pretty though it is, Showdown Town is hugely unwieldy by contrast. As with *Galaxy*, a successful sortie to one of the worlds will garner you a number of shining goodies, in this case jigsaw pieces, which are used to unlock further levels. Though this unlocking was automatic in *Galaxy*, allowing you to drop straight back into the action, Showdown Town asks you to collect these items from dispensers, load them into your vehicle and trundle them off to a central bank. Equally laborious is the collection or purchase of extra parts for your vehicle. When all you want to do is to get on with the pleasure of creation, *Nuts & Bolts* has you chug through loading screens to make deliveries. Want to play more than three challenges in a row? Then you'll have to load back into Showdown Town, walk five paces



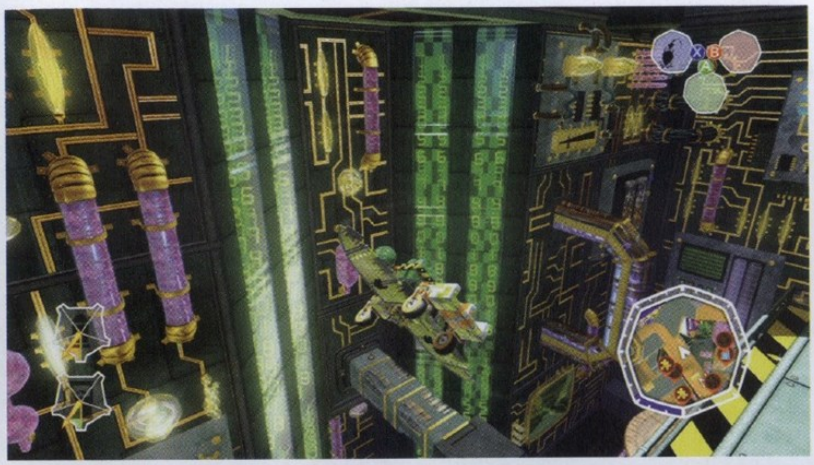
Though it never quite manages to justify its existence with its collectibles, Showdown Town plays host to amusing minigames. Laid off as Grunthilda's henchman, Klungo has since turned his hand to programming. As Banjo progresses, further thrilling levels of *Hero Klungo Sssavesss Teh World* are unlocked

> The game is beautifully rendered, suffused with the kind of joyous colour we had almost forgotten Xbox 360 could produce









Although clipping your viewpoint to right-angled axes feels restrictive at first, the workshop becomes a powerful tool once you get used to it. However, the UI doesn't offer you an immediate save option



The levels that have a unifying theme manage to avoid the mish-mash of Showdown Town. Nutty Acres is a particularly lush environment – and even more gorgeous from up high. Flying upward, the strains of music become fainter and fainter until all you can hear is the wind and the chug of your propellers





to the door that takes you to the next tier of challenges in the place you just came from, and sit through another loading screen. Even accessing the creation tools while in a level requires a short loading screen; given that you want to dart back to the workshop to tweak things after nearly every attempt at an event, this is almost unforgivable. *Nuts & Bolts* fills you with the thrill of experimentation, but then raps you on the knuckles with every iteration.

But for all its cumbersome ways, *Nuts & Bolts* has much else that goes in its favour. Surprisingly, perhaps, one of these things is Banjo, a character who has never captured public imagination in the same way that Nintendo's icons have. And yet here the franchise is at its most charming and witty by being wholly self-deprecating, playing upon its second-rate status next to Mario while making sly digs at Rare's other properties and even Xbox 360 itself. One of the levels you visit, LOGBox 720, sees Banjo travel around the entrails of a videogame console, building innovative contraptions to put out fires on malfunctioning components. For one heart-stopping moment, the screen flickers with those ominous magenta artefacts that usually precede the funereal process of sending a console back to Microsoft – but we've been pranked by those wags at Rare.

Nuts & Bolts is a clever, colourful and witty game – one which deserves better than to be hidden behind stodgy tutorials, flabby interfaces and a host of loading screens. Early on, during one of the many cutscenes that stand between you and being allowed to actually play, the Lord Of Games returns the tubby, retired Banjo to fighting-fit form. You rather wish he might do the same to the game itself – trimming off the fat and giving the player immediate and unlimited access to the parts of it that most appeal. **[7]**





It's difficult to get enough momentum to do any serious damage to these dominoes from the side, so we attached balloons to our heaviest forklift and dropped it in the middle, where a self-destruct would hopefully set off a chain reaction. It's a better plan on paper, unfortunately



Promises, promises



The opening cinematic sees Grunthilda burst from her grave to disturb Banjo's retirement, and, briefly, Rare lets you think this is going to be a re-run of previous games, placing you in front of a long glittering path of collectibles. After five seconds of begrudging collection, however, the Lord Of Games sweeps in to demand some more up-to-date form of entertainment. It's odd that after such a pithy rubbishing of hoary platforming rigmarole, so much of the game involves collecting of the most labour-intensive kind: aside from taxiing jigsaw pieces about, the notes required to buy parts are dotted all about the levels, along with boxes which must be taken to the workshop before their contents can be accessed.



GEARS OF WAR 2

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: EPIC GAMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E195







Achievement quotas are tallied by an inline pop-up, which in the case of the Seriously 2.0 award – kill a mere 100,000 enemies – can be quite dispiriting. The rest tick all the right boxes, though, encouraging you to try out every weapon, learn each tactic, and explore the less-than-imaginative backstory



Chainsaw duels are a simple case of hammering the button to prevail, which is partly why the game's chief boss fight feels hopelessly contrived. They work better in multiplayer, where even a normal sawing makes you an inviting, immobile target

Sniping Locust battalions from an assault derrick, high above a forest that stretches as far as the eye can see, it's easy to forget that Epic Games is anything but an epic company. Indeed, as the credits roll, pretty much everyone in that close-knit outfit gets a chance to sign off, usually with a few kind words to their "other family". Perhaps, when all the heads have been stomped, asses hauled and cities felled, that will be the final word on *Gears Of War*: that a developer so small could think and act so big.

Even by the standards of the original, *Gears 2* is a titanic game. Leaving the stop-and-pop combat system largely untouched, it doubles its efforts elsewhere, piling thrills upon thrills, fan service upon fan service, and surprises upon expectations. There's an analogue to almost everything in the first game – a driving section, a colossal cavern, a hailstorm (made of glass this time, not bats), an abandoned factory, a crumbling palace. But those are just the bones. When it hits its stride, this is compound action at its absolute finest – a masterclass in escalation.

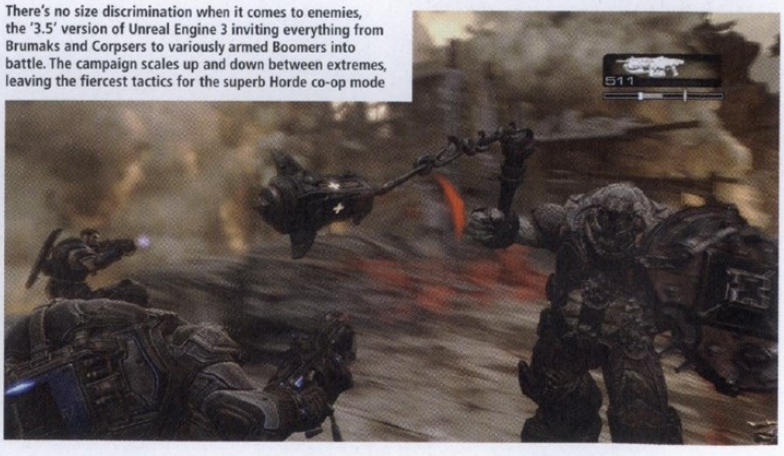
> Gears 2 is a titanic game. Leaving the combat system largely untouched, it doubles its efforts elsewhere, piling thrills upon thrills

Case in point: the aforementioned third chapter. Coming early in the first of five acts, it cannonballs from air defence to ground skirmish, from its giant vehicles to the forest floor, into and out of an NPC convoy, through a siege, into an ambush and quickly into battle with an entire Locust army and its quarterback, the Brumak. Helicopters spiral, derricks tumble, contrails coalesce and the action revolves enough to make you spin-dizzy. Forget Achievements, difficulties and co-op – just taking it all in requires playing it twice.

The controls are still bliss, the rhythm of the active reload as tight as the understeer of the roadie run. The plot isn't, its spuriously pitched themes of loss and retribution sending Dominic Santiago off-mission to find his wife, held somewhere in the bowels of Locustville. There are slave barges, metal sarcophagi, hideous experiments, torture chambers and, worst of all, acting. Then, with a "HOO-RAH", an apparent bout of post-traumatic amnesia and a collective sigh of relief from the audience, the game regains its senses, the camera returning to its true love, Marcus Fenix. Just as before, it's his griping, un-American answers to every bloody nuisance that comes along that keeps the jingoism at bay. And if not those, then this: "They're sinking cities with a giant worm!"

It's thanks to the prodigious talents of Tim Sweeney and his fellow engineers that *Gears 2* really does sink a city with a giant worm. It does more than that with it too, though telling you would mean greater spoilers than how Space Marine X dies a pitiless death in Embargoed Cutscene Y. Whatever the series' myopic eye for influences – its grandest crowd scenes come fresh from the multiplex – that can't





There's no size discrimination when it comes to enemies, the '3.5' version of Unreal Engine 3 inviting everything from Brumaks and Corpsers to variously armed Boomers into battle. The campaign scales up and down between extremes, leaving the fiercest tactics for the superb Horde co-op mode



Best of the new weapons is the mortar, which after a period of cranking spits a cluster bomb high into the air and peppers the eventual landing spot. Several such weapons can be carried on top of a complete loadout, some even mounted on cover for greater accuracy



The gleefully immoral Meat Flag mode casts one unfortunate as the flag, the idea being to walk him, as a human shield, to your team's designated base. Guardian, meanwhile, casts one player as the general, without whom the dead can't respawn



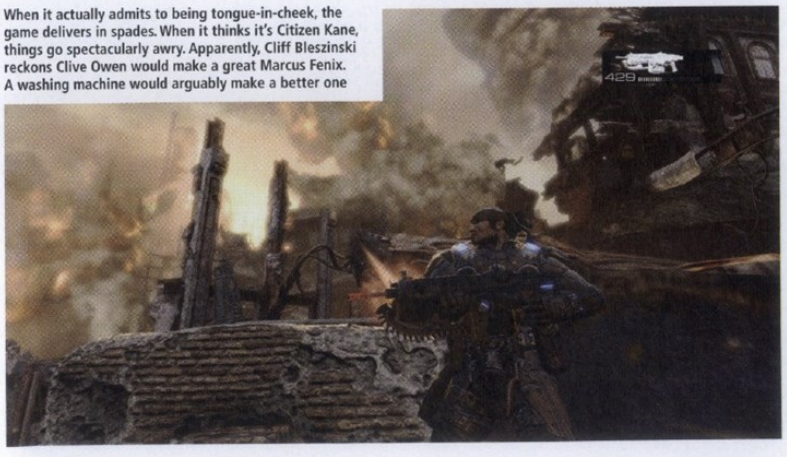
undermine levels that seem oblivious to terms like 'ceiling', 'floor' and 'technical limitations'. The stragglers may peddle last season's God rays, but Epic seems determined to show you where they come from, with backdrops stretching all the way from Heaven to Hell.

Quite enough, then, to keep the eyes busy when the thumbs might otherwise twiddle, which can arise in that default state of normal difficulty and singleplayer. The tooltip for that difficulty reads: 'You enjoy playing the occasional shooter' – and if you don't want a tactics-free ride through battles that almost end before they begin, you might want to take that seriously. So too the news that co-op is being so heavily promoted this time that, in some later battles, the AI Dom is all but useless. Thankfully, the party atmosphere of co-op seldom has to shoulder flagging levels, and reliably makes the game twice as good in almost every respect. But the penultimate act has its share of makeweight arena battles, culminating in a boss fight that falls flat on its face.

Still, even the low points make the entire first game look prostrate. In multiplayer, thanks in no small part to some overdue online matchmaking, the package feels complete. The winning philosophy of *Unreal Tournament III* was to assume less and provide more, especially when considering newcomers; with its decent bots, tutorials, offline-friendly Achievements and system link support, *Gears* has carved itself a lucrative but also noble niche. This is a game that wants to be played and enjoyed by all, its maps and modes striking an improved balance of camaraderie, instant gratification, match turnover and the sense that anyone can be champion no matter when they sign up. Not very hardcore, you might say, but as rewarding an alternative as *Team Fortress 2*.

Having long positioned itself as never taking gamers for granted, Epic has, with its best game to date, called for that to be recognised. That it thinks and acts so big is just half the equation, as *Gears 2* gains just as much from its intimate online play, dexterous set-pieces and modesty in knowing it's not the deepest, smartest game out there. Instead, at a time when everyone wants to turn the entertainment world on its head – or at least be seen to – it proves that the entertainment itself, whichever way up it may be, is what matters most. **[9]**

When it actually admits to being tongue-in-cheek, the game delivers in spades. When it thinks it's Citizen Kane, things go spectacularly awry. Apparently, Cliff Bleszinski reckons Clive Owen would make a great Marcus Fenix. A washing machine would arguably make a better one



Five Live



The box claim of fiveplayer co-op play refers to Horde, which worsens the debt to *Resident Evil 4* by aping its hitherto unchallenged survival mode, The Mercenaries. Pick a character, weapon and map, and off you go against 50 waves of increasingly angry Locust. *Gears* has a far more diverse cast of bad guys this time, including mounted wild-men, shield-carrying brutes, shamans who summon exploding bugs, and enhanced Reavers that cause more trouble grounded than in flight. *Gears* still has arguably the best co-operative play online, breaking down its flanking manoeuvres and suppression tactics into as tight a 'core loop' as you'd see in a singleplayer deathmatch. Being able to crawl towards your teammates when wounded is a great addition also enjoyed by your enemies.



FALLOUT 3

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: BETHESDA SOFTWORKS
DEVELOPER: BETHESDA GAME STUDIOS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E179, E189, E193



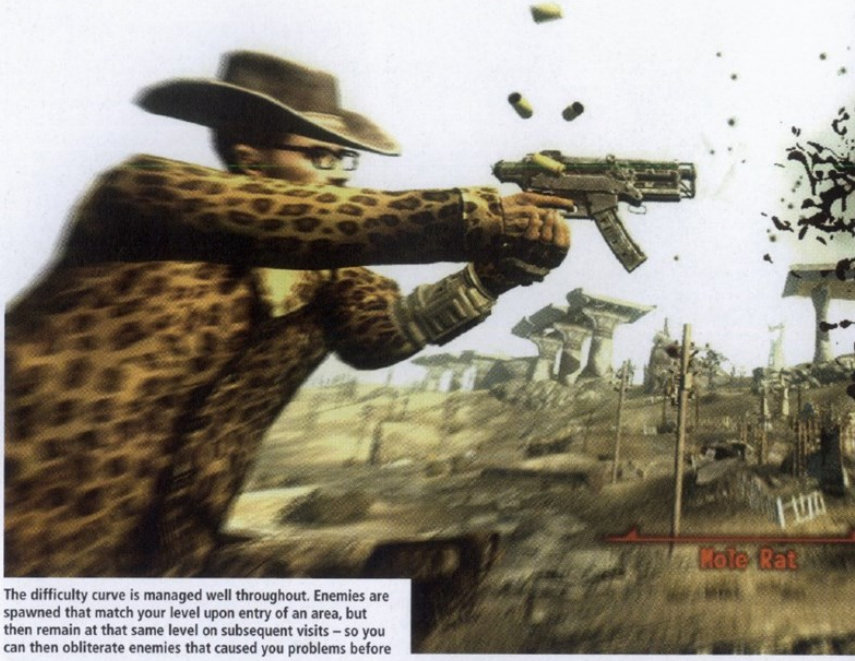




Some characters will offer to join you in your wanderings through the wastes, like Cross, a Brotherhood Of Steel paladin and part-time Grace Jones impersonator. Truth be told, we found her a tad sanctimonious, and were relieved when she was eaten by mutant crab-monsters

The world has gone to hell in a blinding puff of gamma radiation. Or rather, not quite our world, but The World Of Tomorrow as it looked to late-'40s America, with its jumpsuits, nuclear-powered cars and bubble-headed robots. Stepping from the safety of your underground complex for the first time, you see just how this vision of the future weathered the nuclear onslaught: the sounds of post-war music rasp from an old radio in a shattered diner; dust devils whip round a skeleton nestled at the base of a billboard advertising Vault-Tec fallout shelters; the company's mascot, Vault Boy, peers out over the bleached landscape, winking and grinning. *Fallout 3*'s bleak, satirical mix of naïve futurology and post-war paranoia is fun, fearsome and utterly compelling, faithfully capturing the atmosphere of the series' earlier games. But as enticing as such snapshots are, slightly longer exposures to Bethesda's post-apocalyptic RPG can prove less palatable – perhaps a fitting problem to have, given the irradiated setting.

Five-minute slices of *Fallout 3* show it at its absolute worst. Gormlessly unsympathetic to the player's needs, the game is cumbersome in design (see 'Pipped to the post') and frequently incompetent in the details of execution. Some of the more superficial problems will raise a giggle – like



The difficulty curve is managed well throughout. Enemies are spawned that match your level upon entry of an area, but then remain at that same level on subsequent visits – so you can then obliterate enemies that caused you problems before

the physics bug which occasionally twangs mutant scorpions miles into the sky, or the robotic spasms of an NPC caught between dynamic response and scripted action. A climactic argument between two characters starts with the antagonists aborting multiple sentences of varying relevance before standing up awkwardly and forgetting to shoot at each other as designed. One nonetheless drops dead and his ragdoll corpse slithers down a ramp into plain sight of a group of villagers where it remains as they go about their daily business unperturbed. We immediately bring the grave news to a relative of the deceased, but he mysteriously already knows and, besides which, seems to react to the event with all the horror of someone discovering that a pint of milk has gone off.

Many of these foibles are shared by Bethesda's previous epic RPG, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* – a game riddled with nonsense but easily forgiven thanks to the depth of the world and the freedom to decide your path through it. Similarly, given a short time, *Fallout 3* manages the same transition. Bugbears diminish in importance as meticulous character development and rich quest design grips the player. Unlike *Oblivion*, which stymied its main quest-line

> The mix of naïve futurology and post-war paranoia is fun, fearsome and utterly compelling, faithfully capturing the atmosphere of the earlier games

with a repetitive slog through hellish realms, *Fallout 3* keeps its most brilliant inventions for the central story. This begins in earnest when the player flees the cloistered order of Vault 101 to pursue his errant father into the wasteland – but other events quickly demand the player's attention, from the personal problems of local townsfolk to the Super Mutant occupation of central DC.

As wastelands go, Washington's is a surprisingly busy place, and the game contrives to distract you with meaty side-quests at every opportunity. The broad strokes are well considered, and the best recall the ingenious freedom that marked earlier *Fallout* games: an encounter with some slavers can find its resolution through complicity, violence, stealth or a fluid



Facial customisation isn't hugely versatile but the game has a pleasingly farcical dress-up element. The outfit we've selected from *Fallout 3*'s winter collection below combines the dapper threads of a dead slave-trader with the skin-mask of a ghoul









Memorable characters exist: the radiation-withered bartender Gob is an early favourite, while this genteel mutant later becomes a handy companion





Wastelanders built Rivet City from the carcass of an aircraft carrier. Its interior is a maze of poorly signposted identical corridors – realistic, perhaps, but ultimately rather annoying

combination of all three; a group of cannibals prove to be much more open to reason than their grisly pursuits would suggest; mediating a land dispute between some over-privileged humans and their ghoulish neighbours gives the player several delightful avenues of self-expression.

The writing isn't quite as consistent as the ideas that underpin it, however, and though dialogue trees rarely collapse into total logical failure, they do sometimes assume knowledge the player has yet to gain, and often have an unreal quality to them – as if human emotions had been explained to the writer secondhand. Voice-acting is even less reliable, and though some of the robotic bit-parts prompt hearty chuckles, Malcolm McDowell seems to be the only main cast member at home here, albeit underused in his role as the sinister President Eden.

Of course, there's always the option to let your guns do the talking instead. *Fallout 3*'s combat packs a decent heft, and the Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System is a novel means of integrating shooter and RPG conventions, producing uniquely gruesome results to boot. Activating VATS switches from realtime combat to an action point system, allowing you queue up shots on multiple enemies and select individual limbs to attack, switching to a thirdperson camera to show severed heads cartwheeling from bodies in slow-motion geysers of blood. It has its problems – rarely does the game give you reason to shoot anything but the head or torso, and the dynamic camera often produces less than cinematic results. It also seems to fall victim to parallax error: enemies that are easily visible in firstperson suddenly become obscured by scenery in VATS, as though the bullets do not fly from the same place on your thirdperson model. For longer ranged weapons, like the scoped magnum, using VATS proves substantially less effective than shooting manually.

Fallout 3 enjoys some of the benefits of being a slightly smaller game than *Oblivion* – it's a more intensely designed world, and thanks to the concentration and thoughtful crafting of its quests the player never grinds. These substantial boons aside, however, Bethesda treads water in most other areas of obvious improvement, and *Fallout 3* is disappointing in its lack of finesse. But then submersion in this world means that you quickly look past the many frustrations – the uncanny NPCs, the occasional broken quest, the ill-conceived interface, the dozy voice-acting. It's a game that rewards the long-haul with deep, inventive missions which eschew the usual fetch and kill structure, ensuring that the many hours spent in *Fallout 3*'s wasteland aren't wasted. **[7]**

Pipped to the post



With a stripped-down HUD, nearly all information, inventory and statistical management is remanded to the Pip-Boy 3000, a cramped retro screen mounted on your arm, with chunky dials and flickering green-on-black text. It's an idea that probably sounded great to Bethesda's artists, but overlooks the fact that computing has improved in usability over the last 50 years. Colour, it turns out, is actually pretty useful – and trying to interpret the monochrome fuzz of *Fallout 3*'s maps and distinguish between markers is confounding at the best of times and at worst impossible, thanks to the fact that its cartography frequently doesn't resemble your immediate surroundings.







The Metro system is *Fallout 3*'s stand-in for dungeons, and you'll spend more time underground than you'd like. The wasteland has a certain sad majesty, even if the abundance of grey and brown eventually palls



The fearsome flamethrower must be one of the best videogame manifestations of the weapon yet, gobbing great bursts of fire. Other weapons sound a little too like pop guns – a relief to the ear if lacking realism







Levels are loaded beneath introductory animations that dramatically swoop around and neatly sum up messy historical conflict with all the clean slickness of Sky News



CALL OF DUTY: WORLD AT WAR

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: TREYARCH
PREVIOUSLY IN: E191, E194



It's a pity that *World At War* had to feature that staple of the WWII shooter, a beach landing. Shot-down plane screaming overhead; a neighbouring lander blown out of the water; a dousing in the ocean at the end: all present

For those fearing that WWII is expended as a setting for an FPS, *World At War* manages to introduce subtle change to the formula. While you're used to being pitted in such against-the-odds battles against dug-in foes as Normandy landings and desperate defences of Stalingrad, *World At War* instead presents your enemies in headlong flight, and you and your allies victoriously pursuing them. For here we have two new scenarios: the ruthless Russian assault on Berlin and the bloody advance of the Americans into Okinawa. Though triumph isn't far away for your forces, threat is still all pervading, with suicidal Japanese charging over razed fortifications and Germans doggedly holed up in shattered tenements.

The setting allows Treyarch to make *World At War* address the horrors that revenge makes soldiers commit. Both the Americans and Russians are established as enraged at atrocities committed by their enemies, with an Japanese officer stubbing out a cigarette on the face of the unfortunate Private Pyle before cutting his throat at the game's very start, and a German later callously machine-gunning injured Russians in the Stalingrad rubble. These are nothing more than matinee villains, of course; all the better to fuel exhilarating rushes through their camps, flamethrowers searing and bullets rending the fleeing troops before you. You'd almost feel guilty, but for the obvious pleasure Treyarch takes in it all, rewarding kills with delightful parabolas of viscera and brains, and portraying epic destruction with splendid vistas of fire and black smoke. Regrettably, such entertainment tends to undermine Treyarch's loftier goals.

Once the spectacle subsides, the technical cracks begin to show. You'll frequently see opposing soldiers obliviously standing right next to each other, tossing your suspension of disbelief to the floor and proving a frustration when the actions of your cohorts are invaluable guides to enemy positions. The invisible triggers in the environments that progress the level scripting along are particularly evident too, with entire squads of hostile enemies exiting from the battlefield seemingly just because you managed to step over the line that governs them.

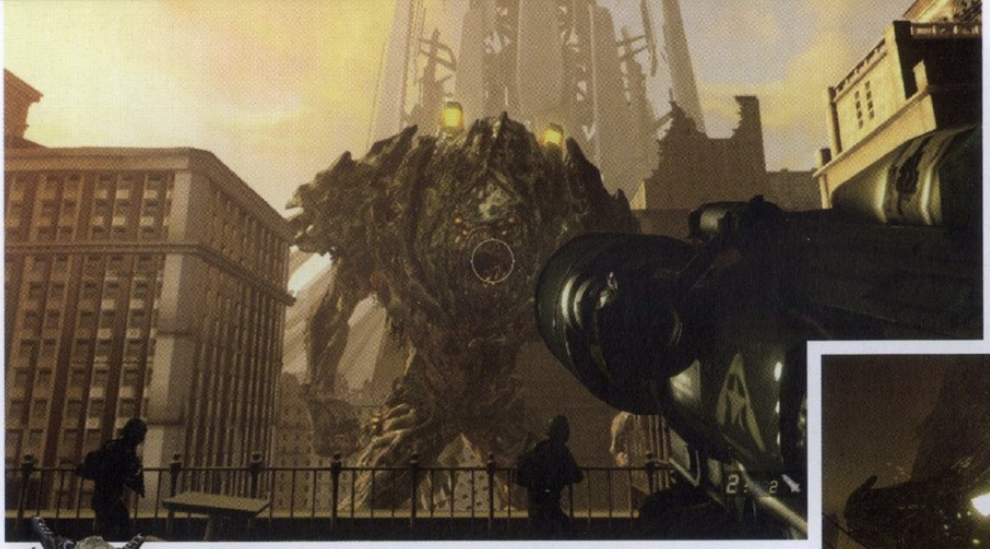
In fact, all of *World At War*'s achievements can be attributed squarely to Infinity Ward's work on *COD4* – the impeccable graphical engine, the blood and thunder, the swift, smooth gunplay, its fashion of storytelling, the multiplayer. Many levels reference those of *COD4* too, with a sniper mission, panicked rescues and mentors dying. But none challenge the heights of that game, and Treyarch has failed to notice some of Infinity Ward's subtler accomplishments in setting naturalistic objectives. Here, we're back to destroying three tanks, planting four explosives, clearing three anti-air gun crews. Meanwhile, calling in oddly pinpoint rocket strikes seems a crass way to approach settling the WWII setting with player expectations set by *COD4*. Treyarch seems incapable of striking the careful balance Infinity Ward has always pulled off between incendiary spectacle and historical accuracy. This is WWII on amphetamines, not the sadder, more sober and traumatic WWII of Infinity Ward's *COD2*.

It's difficult not to enjoy the game, however, especially in fourplayer co-op. *World At War* is peppered with outstanding moments amid the tuned controls and weapon dynamics, such as a Berlin street battle and stunned Japanese troops stumbling across a devastated landscape. Treyarch has taken just enough from *COD4* to make *World At War* a broad success, but it remains firmly in its shadow. **[6]**

Dammit!



The game's voice acting is of a good standard, though Kiefer Sutherland's worn-down hardman act can feel incongruous with the 1945 setting. Gary Oldman plays the voice of the hardy – and hardcore – Sergeant Reznov, who leads you through the Russian campaign and has a particular axe to grind against the Germans. During several missions, particularly a tank battle, his constant screaming of "Kill them all!" and "They spilt our blood on the soil of our motherland, now it's time to do the same to them!" becomes somewhat wearing. As for the Germans and Japanese, they're content shouting "Banzai" and "Kommen ist hier!" This failure to humanise the enemy makes them easier to shoot, but rather dents the game's greater ambitions to examine the monstrosity of revenge.







As before, the Auger is the best *Resistance* weapon, both in the hands of you and your opponents. After a brief pause at the point of exit, its slugs punch through scenery turning cover tactics on their head





The problem with these skyboxes, besides having 'money shot' written all over them, is that they're just backdrops. Take them away and you often have levels that simply move between corridors and cubicles



RESISTANCE 2

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SCEE
DEVELOPER: INSOMNIAC PREVIOUSLY IN: E187, E194

Resistance 2 is every bit the product of *Resistance: Fall Of Man*'s mentality: it's OK to do things by the numbers so long as those numbers are bigger than everyone else's. That means more players in multiplayer (60, up from 40), more weapons in the arsenal, more storeys on the bosses, more enemies on the screen, and more options on the menus. More, more, more. Has any thought been given to why, beyond the obvious marketing cachet? Yes, but in retrospect. "We have these numbers, now what do we do with them?"

For the most part, attempts to justify them feel equally like damage limitation. Multiplayer Skirmish matches split teams into smaller squads before assigning micro-objectives within the battle, promoting intimacy, role and a vital modicum of clarity. A revised co-op mode forgoes a retread of the singleplayer campaign for eightplayer communal grinding, its maps doling out enemies and waypoints apace, awarding XP for every followed instruction and accurate shot. Those big numbers again.

It's partially successful, though often in the rather cynical capacity you'd expect of a token-harvest like *Phantasy Star Online* or *Bounty Hounds*. The real object of the mission is seldom found within, but in the statistical handouts that occur afterwards. And while the first game's maps deserved the benefit of the doubt – going from *Ratchet & Clank* to an FPS wasn't as neat a transition for Insomniac as many seemed to think – the failure to improve them is telling.

In singleplayer, the story of Lieutenant Nathan Hale continues, his slow surrender to the blood of the Chimera doing little to stop those last vestiges of personality get wrung out before your eyes. Last time he could carry numerous weapons, making him a walking laboratory of novel, experimental firepower. Now he's limited to a combination of two, which can leave him ill-equipped for the game at its worst. And here we find another chimera, of *Serious Sam* and *Call Of Duty*'s veteran difficulty, overpopulated, devoid of pity and lacking common sense.

However many good guys and bad guys are on the battlefield, however many lines of sight are in play, the second you pop a toenail over that perimeter you're a bullet magnet. Not just bullets, either, but the wild range of beams, fireballs and energy pellets that make fighting the Chimera such a chore. What's the tactic for beating two 20-foot brutes that charge headlong in your direction, firing weapons that defy range, ammo and cover? You tell us. Logic suggests the homing rounds of the Bullseye or the precision bursts of the Marksman – but the rules are rarely defined, let alone adhered to.

The halfway point sees a second wind of sorts, the Trophy for 1,000 kills hurtling by, the impression of a world under siege growing as each backdrop – the Chicago level, especially – becomes more than just a distant spectacle. Much more? Not really. Enough to really matter? Never. **[6]**





Resistance 2's version of the Chewits monster likes eating missiles – or so it seems as he has a third painful try at swallowing you. When it comes to this game's bosses, the smallest are best

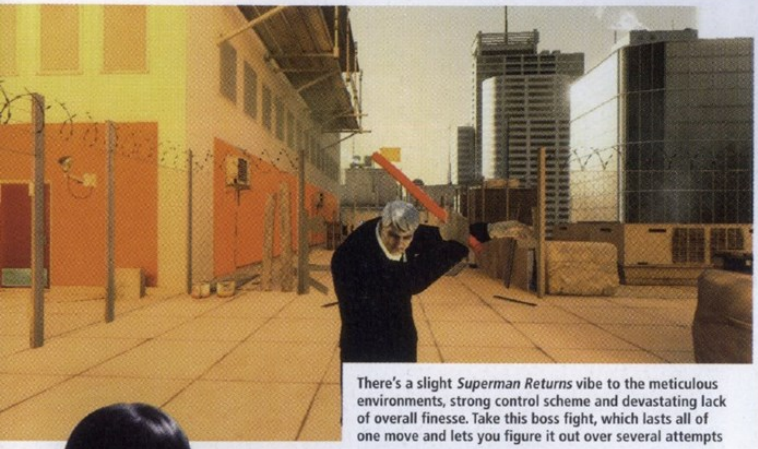
All the wrong moves



Thoughts of *Resistance 2* being an acquired taste are quashed by its AI and physics, which take turns to break the game's back. One vivid example saw a town square full of cars and barricades host a giant arena battle. On one side, a stream of allied troops; on the other, three Chimera giants lugging fireball launchers. Despite the instruction to move between cover, little stood up to the incoming fire, the cars blown wildly into the air while the splash damage ravaged your health, often enough for an outright kill. The solution: run around sniping (more running than sniping) until one creature fell, bringing silence with it. Where were the others? Stuck on the scenery, more concerned with running on the spot than reacting to our headshots.



In a game like this, your heart rate should practically beat out the score. Rare chase sequences threaten to raise it, but the preordained levels neuter them again



There's a slight *Superman Returns* vibe to the meticulous environments, strong control scheme and devastating lack of overall finesse. Take this boss fight, which lasts all of one move and lets you figure it out over several attempts





MIRROR'S EDGE

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: DICE PREVIOUSLY IN: E178, E187



Slo-mo makes it possible to pull off the oft-advertised disarms. It feels superfluous, as if added to address the ruthless calibration of enemy strength and player health

Run, grab it, run



Faith's movement system is fundamentally sound, the pitter-patter of her plimsolled feet rising as you pick up speed, well-timed button presses ensuring smooth passage over and under hurdles. Does it mitigate the innate clumsiness of firstperson platforming, though? Sadly not, as evidenced by the countless times you bang haplessly off the target of a lunge. Despite the hard sell of there being some grand technique to it all, the later level design isn't nearly tight enough to convince. The time trials stress the importance of finding alternate routes, but once discovered they are as linear and inflexible as before. There's no getting around it: the design foundation isn't strong enough for this to be much more than a brochure for DICE's tech team and environment artists.

Mirror's Edge is like a piece of Scandinavian furniture, picked for its perfect blend of form and function, discovered on receipt to have the wrong pieces in the box, ambiguous instructions and too few tools to make it all come together. Its showroom lustre is undeniable, and from day one it has seemed a great fit for Swedish studio DICE – the kind of laser-sculpted marvel that years of *Battlefield* have kept locked in the warehouse. But, alas, the package is far from ideal.

Those expecting a style-focused, seductively open parkour game like Rebellion's *Free Running* are in for the biggest shock: this is more about basic environmental puzzling and rehearsing linear routes. Inspired by movies like The Matrix and District 13, it ups the ante by setting the dogs on you – in this case black helicopters, men with guns and ninjas in hockey masks. To help you on your way, it daubs most of your escape routes in striking red, the idea being to take pipes, walls, jumps and ledges in your stride. Attackers, or 'Blues' in the game's lingo, can be overcome with punches, kicks and button-press disarms – but engagement is discouraged.



The Faith of the promo art is sadly absent from the game proper, invisible in play and replaced in cutscenes by a Dexter's Laboratory version. Not wanting to render the story using Unreal Engine 3 is understandable – but this?

Still a great premise, perhaps, elevated by a viewpoint reminiscent of *Breakdown*, Namco's trapped-in-firstperson beat/shoot/drive/vomit 'em up for Xbox. Heroine Faith, furthermore, is a striking lead – as outwardly hip as the courier bags she collects for Achievements or Trophies. But the game makes a fool of her. Is it a *Portal*-style puzzler or a breathless steeplechase; an Orwellian parable or freeform Olympics? Unable to decide until it's left the springboard, it tries to be all of them but manages none.

Its story is so ethereal you barely know it's there, and when you do you wish it wasn't. Its puzzles scarcely evolve beyond the obvious, its combos beyond sequences its levels can't sustain. Attempts to infuse the recurring, utilitarian environments with something – anything – dynamic produce disastrously signposted boss battles, bumbling arcade sequences and the gross indulgence of Faith's lesser-known talent: turning valves.

But the real tragedy of the game, with its dedicated time-trial modes and leaderboards, is its failure to capture anything of what popularised parkour to begin with. There's no freedom or empowerment in constantly failing to make a predefined jump hemmed in with dead ends. Nor is there sustained momentum, nor any real sense of verticality beyond what passes beneath your feet. The game's Unreal Engine 3 implementation is incredible, able to render everything from the rooftops to the street – but it ferries you between them in elevators. The flight-not-fight ethic of its combat, meanwhile, hides an inconvenient truth: it's more enjoyable when taken at your own pace.

Aptly enough, there are two opposite ways to view *Mirror's Edge*, ours obviously being the less forgiving one. Its ostensible break from the norm, its sparkling monoliths and its Nordic skies perform some kind of counterbalance, but there is simply not enough depth or reward to the realisation of parkour that lies beyond that sheen. **[5]**





Battles and zones are themed around racial pairings – dwarfs and greenskins, humans and chaos, and elves vs dark elves. There's a wide choice of classes – ten per side. While some are essentially mirrors, their skills and appearance are so different that PVP battles are guaranteed to look colourful and varied





WARHAMMER ONLINE: AGE OF RECKONING

FORMAT: PC RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: GOA
DEVELOPER: MYTHIC PREVIOUSLY IN: E189

WAR, to which this is so knowingly abbreviated, is a game trying to wear two hats. One is *Dark Age Of Camelot*, Mythic's ongoing *EverQuest*-era MMORPG that eschewed much of the player-vs-environment adventuring that so defines this young, acronym-heavy genre in favour of large-scale player-vs-player combat. Here, constant war wages between the forces of Order – humans, dwarfs and elves – and those of Destruction – orcs, chaos and dark elves. This isn't just a convenient character-selection backdrop, but ties into almost every action in the game. Even the most solo-oriented PVE quest tends to be themed to that essential conflict, but the meat of the game is realm-vs-realm player battles, a mix of open-world territory tussles and instanced battlegrounds.

The other pillar of *WAR*'s heritage is, fairly evidently, *World Of WarCraft*. While Blizzard may itself owe a great debt to the Warhammer tabletop game, the main inspiration for *WAR*'s art and interface is obvious. And understandable – this is aimed squarely at lapsed or curious *WOW* players as well as the more actively competitive. Realm-vs-realm may be its heart, but it's dressed up in a huge amount of grinding and questing.

That PVE element may be substantial, but it's also fairly tokenistic. The quests, though refreshingly rapid compared to the drawn-out animal-part collection of other MMOs, are mundane. The equipment is oddly homogenised, preventing characters – and players – from appearing truly individual. NPC settlements, though lavishly designed, feel a little lifeless. This element has especially suffered now the initial playerbase has moved on to high-level areas. The influx of new players has slowed dramatically, so a newcomer at this stage will roam dishearteningly empty zones, the instanced, queued-for PVP scenarios his best of hope of encountering other players.

This is mainstream MMOs' finest PVP hour, however. The player fights are blended smoothly into the world, so a move from thumping a server-spawned monster to fireballing a player-controlled foe feels both natural and joyous. With both types of kill granting universal experience, there isn't the uncertainty about how and why players would battle others that's so terrifying to MMOs' more casual audience. Lower level characters are temporarily bumped up to the zone's average when they enter, death penalties are almost non-existent, and resurrection is fast, so the sense of reward grows, RVR victories being the route to the game's most desirable armour and weapons. While the later sieges are thrilling, *WAR*'s single greatest achievement is transforming that dauntingly vertical climb from PVE up to competitive PVP into a gentle incline.

There is, unfortunately, something a little one-note about this steely PVP focus. It soon becomes a game about ever-honed tactics and elaborately planned group play, the sense of a world overwhelmed by statistics. A less committed MMO player will either change his ways or abandon the game, for the claustrophobically clustered battles and overtly gamey interface offer scant room for relaxed adventuring, or even for idle socialising. It's hard to imagine, say, a player wedding in this grim and peculiarly testosterone-fuelled world. *WAR*'s initial surge of sign-ups was spectacular, but it must work on what's outside of the sometimes exhaustingly frenetic PVP battles if it's to grow its audience. It is, for sure, the strongest MMO launch for a long while, and the genre's deftest ever take on PVP – but its appeal may yet prove too narrow. **[7]**





Each realm has a vast capital that the server-wide battles eventually reach. They're visual triumphs, though less so in terms of purpose and pleasure

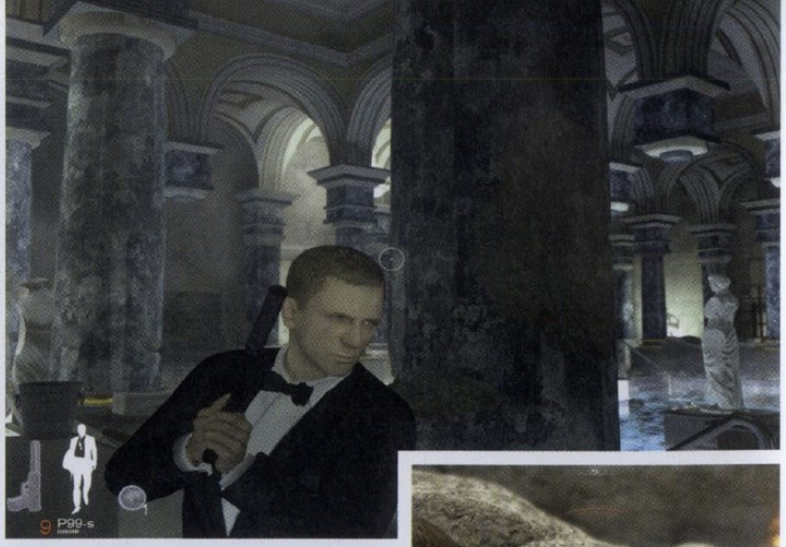
Online anonymity



One of *WAR*'s design goals is to remove some of the genre's more arbitrary conventions. Here, you don't have to buy bigger inventory bags, and you don't have to watch 30-second animations of your character sitting down to eat. Whenever a party is formed, by default anyone can join without being invited. A menu screen brings up a list of all nearby open parties, roughly what they're up to and how long it'll take to reach them. If one appeals, you can join with a mouse-click. This approach is taken even further with public quests – adventures anyone can join, a ten-minute escalation from killing grunts to an epic beastie. Everyone's effort is rewarded, whether they're grouped or not. The PQs are *WAR*'s finest contribution to traditional MMORPG play, but the current dearth of new sign-ups after the initial rush is hurting them badly.













The change in perspective is instantly second nature, and after this smooth handling expect many imitators. Daniel Craig's character model is a teeny bit wonky, though

Ah, a balancing section: Sixaxis at the ready, PS3 owners. There's no driving, which given past attempts is probably a good thing. Your one encounter with cars – trying to cross a road while poisoned – is unbearably frustrating



007: QUANTUM OF SOLACE

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3, WII
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: TREYARCH (360, PS3), BEENOX (PC, WII) PREVIOUSLY IN: E192

A literal Quantum



You might recognise the above scene from a movie released in 2006, yet it occurs halfway through this game. So, what gives? The box may say *007: Quantum Of Solace*, but this is not in fact the game of the film Quantum Of Solace. It has levels based on it, a total of five, which are dotted among another ten levels based on Casino Royale. It's a little ridiculous, particularly as innocuous moments from the first film are turned into running battles. Bond meeting someone in a hotel becomes two levels of corridor pyrotechnics culminating in blowing up a helicopter on the roof, for example.

Wheel out the catchphrases, book the tickets and buy the popcorn: there's a new Bond movie out. After EA's rather careless handling of the franchise it's the turn of Activision and Treyarch to translate Fleming's secret agent into the world of videogames. Espionage, gunplay, car chases, the odd sultry vixen and a few big explosions? This should be a breeze.

Were it so easy. *Quantum Of Solace* manages to be, if anything, ever so slightly dull. The basics are competent and solid – the weapons have a kick to them, the silenced pistols have the same punctuating thrill as ever, and explosives go boom with aplomb – but there's an ambiguous reason for this distinction. You can feel the *COD* engine behind every step, shot and stumble, dictating the pace of exchanges and frequency of set-pieces. It's an engine that not only enables the game, but controls it.



There are mobile phones dotted throughout the levels, which rather than just being collectables alert you to the location of weapon caches and planned attacks on you

While this means *QOS* doesn't ever quite shake off a faux-*COD* feel, it also has the happy benefit of conferring fundamentals most shooters would die for. Almost all levels consist of fighting six or seven enemies, running a few hundred metres, fighting six or seven more, and continuing on this merry cycle for a few more rounds before either running away or blowing up something really big. The game switches between firstperson when moving freely and a *Gears*-esque thirdperson perspective in cover, and it's a slickly handled trick.

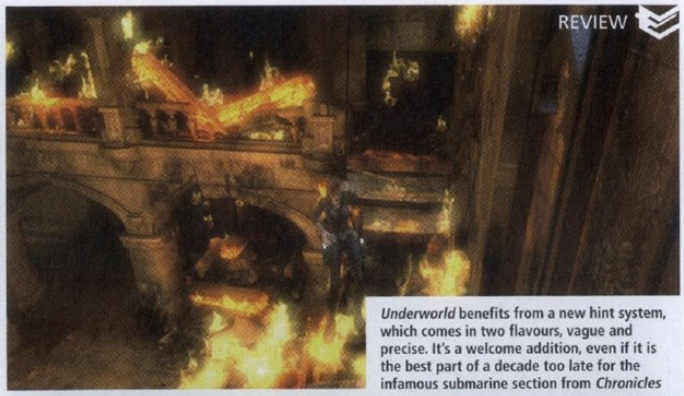
The pacing might be obvious, but it works up to a point and *QOS* does occasionally mix it up, particularly at the end of levels. There's a chase sequence, a few escapes, one or two situations where stealth is necessary, and the odd sniping section. Some work well and create a real sense of panic, the escapes in particular, while others are going through the motions, but they serve to break up the monotony. They're certainly far more effective than the thirdperson movement the environment sometimes requires – holding up to climb a ladder, holding right or left to sidle along a ledge, or 'balancing' with the left stick to avoid falling off a beam. Ho hum.

Appropriately enough, *QOS* takes some inspiration from *The Bourne Conspiracy* in its melee combat – though thankfully it's neither as pernicious or pervasive. Clicking in the right stick near a foe triggers the beginnings of a brief thirdperson cutscene with one button to push – get it right and Bond puts the thug down with a fancy move, wrong and you're injured and pushed back. It's hugely artificial, but the ease of use means it never quite becomes offensive.

Inoffensive isn't a bad summary of *QOS*. It's not surprising Treyarch has created a shooter with some decent moments and a Bond feel – after all, it has the *COD* engine and the Bond licence. But it's no better than average. There's no sophistication, subtlety or real inspiration in the design. It might have Craig's likeness, but this Bond is more like Connery's, a thug in a dinner jacket. **[5]**



Other puzzle platformers have levels that include machinery: many of *Underworld*'s locations are machines, giant, slumbering engines that need to be patiently coaxed back to life



Underworld benefits from a new hint system, which comes in two flavours, vague and precise. It's a welcome addition, even if it is the best part of a decade too late for the infamous submarine section from *Chronicles*



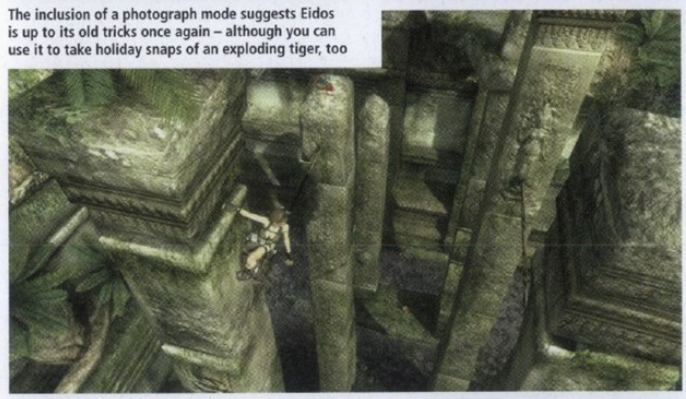
TOMB RAIDER: UNDERWORLD

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), DS, PC, PS2, PS3, WII
RELEASE: NOVEMBER 21 PUBLISHER: EIDOS
DEVELOPER: CRYSTAL DYNAMICS PREVIOUSLY IN: E186, E191, E193





The inclusion of a photograph mode suggests Eidos is up to its old tricks once again – although you can use it to take holiday snaps of an exploding tiger, too



Early on in *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, you'll find yourself standing on the decks of a huge container ship, shooting it out with the regular cast of faceless desperados. You've killed off the first wave and now, trying to get to the bridge, you might end up fumbling around at various hatchways, all of which will refuse to open. The solution, of course, lies not with doors but with the containers themselves, and a breathless race to an upper gantry by means of careful platforming. Brief *COD4* flashbacks might have led you to temporarily forget what *Tomb Raider*'s all about, but the eventual payoff suggests that Crystal Dynamics certainly hasn't.

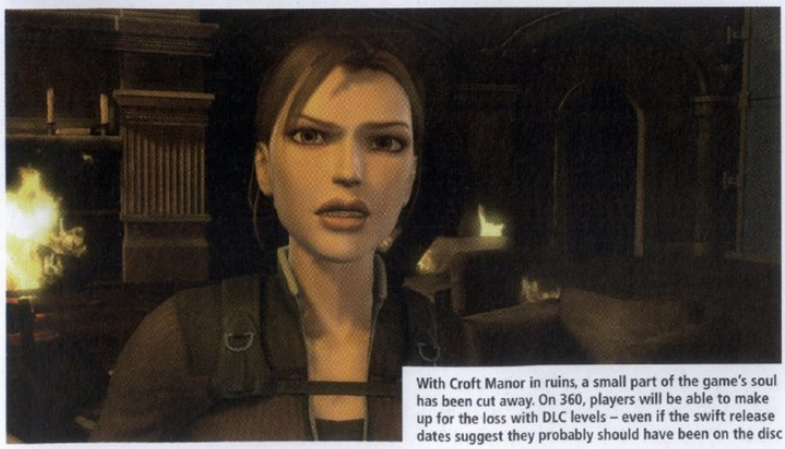
If anything, after last year's *Anniversary*, the developer is continuing to dig back to the roots of the franchise. That violent shootout is the exception rather than the rule once again and, bar a few memorable exceptions, *Underworld* plays out in desolate shrines and undersea temples – out of doors and far away from modern civilisation – in a lonely world of clockwork and runes.

And it's a pleasure to be reminded how exhilarating that world can be. Browny, velvet-voiced and with just the right level of physical caricature, Lara Croft is a charmingly uncomplicated protagonist. She knows exactly what she's good for, as do her custodians, and *Underworld* is a monument to the joys of graceful movement and precision puzzling. As Croft's moveset gently expands to include wall springs, more advanced abseiling and some solid flying kicks, it's approaching the point at which you genuinely feel you can do anything you want; occasionally adolescent level design may waste no opportunity to get her soggy or mud-splattered, yet few videogame characters have the ability to make you feel this particular combination of power and grace so deeply.

Further in, there are yet more indicators that Crystal Dynamics is making the most of the licence. *Underworld* has finally worked out something semi-interesting to do with Croft's motorbike, and when it comes to spectacle, the game's more than capable of surprising you with a sudden shift in scale, perhaps revelling in the sleepy stirring of ancient machines. Combat has benefited from a handful of additions, too: there's dual targeting, melee attacks, and you can now shoot while clinging to a wall. But even if *Tomb Raider* still can't quite bring its gunplay to life, it has at least come up with some explosive distractions – namely the deliriously satisfying sticky grenades and a resoundingly conclusive manner of finishing off zombies – to cover that up.

There are a few glitches along the way: the camera continues to struggle in close quarters, turning a few too many jumps into leaps of faith, and exiting backwards off a pole remains as difficult an activity as it probably is in real life. Yet none of this damages the overall poise and classiness that characterises Croft's latest outing. While it's occasionally fiddly, it has pace and spectacle and style to spare. *Underworld* is that rare game that manages to provide a real adventure to go along with its action. **[8]**





With Croft Manor in ruins, a small part of the game's soul has been cut away. On 360, players will be able to make up for the loss with DLC levels – even if the swift release dates suggest they probably should have been on the disc

Guaranteed Moneymaker



Tomb Raider continues to lead the pack in terms of charismatic animation, with Croft's swings, leaps and kicks contributing as much to the game's overall success as the deviously structured environments. For the first time, Eidos's heroine is motion-captured, pinching her moves – with some gentle exaggeration for effect – from the rather memorably named stuntwoman and gymnast Heidi Moneymaker. The results are largely wonderful, making the few geometry glitches – most notably in the game's Mexico section, where Croft occasionally gets stuck in hedgerows and ends up marching on the spot – quietly unforgivable.





GUITAR HERO WORLD TOUR

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3, WII
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: NEVERSOFT PREVIOUSLY IN: E190

Drum roll



The only peripheral substantially different from its *Rock Band* equivalent is the drum kit, which has five drum pads (snare, two toms, two cymbals) and a bass pedal. Unfortunately it's not a change for the better. It's nice enough hitting both your cymbals to activate star power, but their height can't be adjusted, which seems an odd oversight. The drum pedal has no definition – your foot feels like it's pressing on sponge rather than the button-like click that *RB*'s pedal gives – and doesn't have anything to hold it in place beyond a piece of sticky plastic, so it constantly moves. The pads themselves also seem susceptible to bubbling. In short, the build quality of Red Octane's kit isn't as good as competition that's been on the market for over a year.

So, is it better than *Rock Band 2*? Not really. *Guitar Hero World Tour* is still worth considering on its own merits, though, not least as a much-needed fresh start for the franchise that once set the pace in the music genre. It's also surprisingly distinct, operating between *Rock Band*'s simulation and *Wii Music*'s emphasis on personal creativity and improvisation, and essentially a game that comes packaged with an excellent creation and editing tool.

First, the plastic tools. The guitar is a little bigger and heavier than before, and has a touchpad for solo sections. The touchpad's unwieldy, with the colours inset (therefore impossible to see when playing) and poorly pronounced divisions to guide fingers, so you end up simply tapping solos out on the fret buttons. It's a high-quality peripheral despite that, and undoubtedly the best this series has yet produced. The drums prove a little more problematic (see 'Drum roll'), while the mic is, well, a mic, and works fine.

The core band experience is competently handled, but full of inexplicable little problems. The most major is that any player who fails a song instantly fails the rest of the band too. This is a perverse decision – one of *Rock Band*'s greatest pleasures is getting together with like-minded friends to push and save each other on higher difficulty modes. Scraping together through a mix of hard and expert is much more rewarding than another round of flawless performances on medium. No attempt has been made to match *Rock Band*'s 'touring' feel, surely rather odd in a game designated *World Tour*, so there are no fans, vans or one-off charity gigs to add colour to proceedings. Finally, the band's score counter is placed in the top left of the screen, out of comfortable peripheral vision and therefore quite useless.

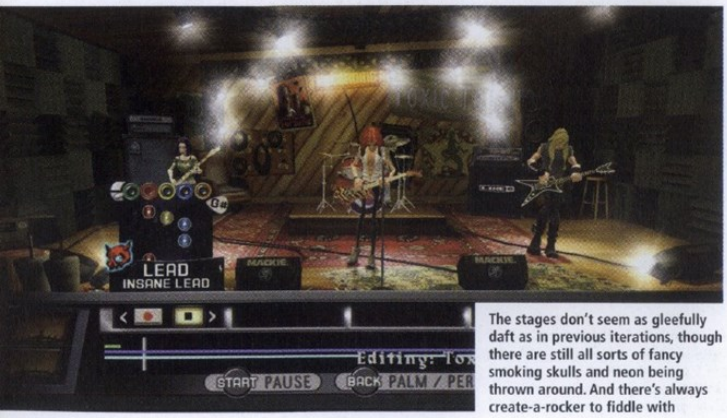


There's a general lack of onscreen feedback compared to that found in *Rock Band*, and showing off your shredding skills during solos is somewhat diminished by the absence of anything akin to its percentage counter

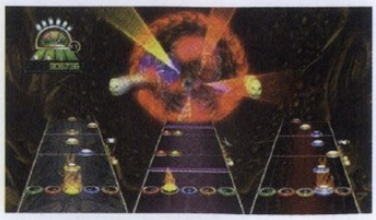
There has been some progress on note placement, however, which was arguably *Guitar Hero 3*'s biggest flaw. Here the tracks are more sensitively structured, and on the harder difficulties there are some corkers. Real improvement comes with bass, which now has an open strum (ie, no frets) mixing up with the usual notes, and is for the first time a challenge and a pleasure. The new very easy mode is also an excellent addition, necessary for that tricky task of introducing neophytes to vicarious stardom.

We're all neophytes when it comes to the Recording Studio and GH Mix sections – the reason that *GHWT* is a genre landmark. Allowing players to create and remix their own music is a huge leap, and implemented very well for a first try. After choosing a scale you freestyle sections, then enter the GH Mix section to tweak them. It's relatively easy to operate, although the interface is sometimes a little obtuse and there's no good reason why a controller can't be used in GH Mix instead of the instrument peripheral. The resulting tunes sound a little under-produced and tinny on occasion, but that's a small price to pay for actually crafting a piece of music in *Guitar Hero*.

If creation is *GHWT*'s greatest draw, it also represents the rest of the game: execution is competent, but not exceptional. But when you look at the package, dismissing it for this would be more than a little ornery, and perhaps its greatest achievement is defying comparisons to *Rock Band* and emerging as its own game. *GHWT* might be a little rough around the edges, but it's a good stab at reinvigorating the franchise and, with a little more experience under its belt, a little more spit and polish next time around, you feel that Neversoft might produce something truly special. **[7]**



The stages don't seem as gleefully daft as in previous iterations, though there are still all sorts of fancy smoking skulls and neon being thrown around. And there's always create-a-rocker to fiddle with



The singleplayer tour isn't cut down, more's the pity, as being forced to play through four- and five-song sets seems to have become the norm. A return to progression through individual songs would be most welcome



ANIMAL CROSSING CITY FOLK

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), DECEMBER 5 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



The result of taking liberties with the clock appears to be a bad (yet much admired by the animals) hair day rather than a visit from Resetti

Seven years after the Japanese launch of its GameCube iteration, *Animal Crossing*'s return to the bigger screen is, unsurprisingly, very much in the style of the hugely successful *Wild World*. *City Folk* is effectively *Wild World 2.0*, allowing players of the DS game to migrate to Wii and continue pottering aimlessly around their mature towns, bringing their possessions and neighbours with them.

All the new features are accessible to veterans and newcomers alike. There's slightly more room to roam, including space for two additional animal residents as well as separate houses to allow four players to co-exist independently on one console. Online visitors can marvel at the sight of a town's residents wandering freely instead of retreating to their homes, and can chat via the Wii Speak mic while gathering in the four-seater Roost bar to hear KK Slider play a selection of old favourites.



The city's central plaza is populated by random animals from outside the town. Unfortunately, there's no way to persuade them to move in

The city area is a short – and thanks to driver Kapp'n, usually amusing – bus ride away. It's a small plaza where some of the weekly visitors to *Wild World* have permanent shops, plus some extras including an auction house, a karmic realignment for irritating insurance salesman Lyle and the option to swap faces with a Mii. New designer store Gracie Grace seems priced to appeal solely to *Wild World* bellionaires.

There are no significant gameplay changes. The new script is equally well written and equally prone to repetition. The menu shortcuts are easy to navigate but suffer from an annoying lag before their contents pop up on the screen. The online functions still involve opening the gates, adding friend codes, sending invites and trusting the Wii internet connection. However, when things do go wrong, and a wireless hiccup forces a reset, Mr Resetti seems to be but a lingering memory from previous *Animal Crossings*. Thank Nintendo for this smallest of blessings. **[7]**



NINJATOWN

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SOUTHPEAK INTERACTIVE
DEVELOPER: VENAN ENTERTAINMENT

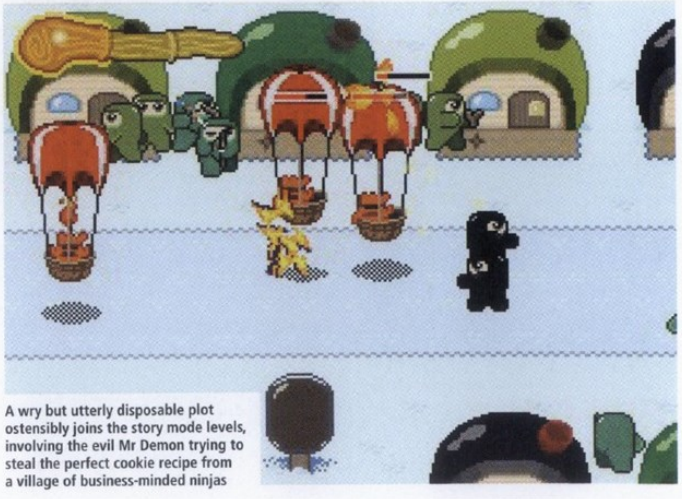
The tower defence genre might saturate the Flash gaming scene, but it's been little seen on console to date. Now, though, PS3's *PixelJunk Monsters* is joined by a handheld choice in the guise of *Ninjatown*. Both titles demonstrate how professional developers can add new ideas to the formula. While *Monsters* featured the need to control an avatar, *Ninjatown* includes a plethora of player abilities and pits both ranged and directly attacking units against its processions of critters.

The basic game is just what you'd expect, however. The critters emerge from a start point and move towards your village. Let ten through and it's game over. Each map contains predetermined positions upon which you can build a selection of eight different ninja huts. Anti Ninjas are powerful hitters but slow moving, while Business Ninjas are weaker but fast, and can hold enemies in place to allow Anti Ninjas to get some hits in. Snipers and Forest Ninjas, meanwhile, are necessary to hit flying critters. Killing enemies earns cash that can be invested in new huts, upgrading existing ones or constructing buildings that modify the attributes of adjacent huts, upgrading their ninjas.

Setting positions for ninjas to stand in their huts' attack zones adds a little RTS strategy, while Ol' Master Ninja powers, also awarded for destroying enemies, can have effects as freezing the action to buy time to build, blow enemies in specified directions or burn them with a blast from a magnifying glass, while a roulette wheel spun at the end of each level wins tokens that can be spent on dealing out area-based effects. Though its essential concept is well worn, *Ninjatown* is sturdily designed and offers a commendably flexible set of strategies for survival against the hordes. As such, it's an easy recommendation should you find yourself without access to a web browser. **[6]**



The visuals are drawn by former EGM staffer Shawn Smith, who created the Shawnimals toy series. Their simple styling is both charming and expedient clear when the action intensifies



A wry but utterly disposable plot ostensibly joins the story mode levels, involving the evil Mr Demon trying to steal the perfect cookie recipe from a village of business-minded ninjas



COMMAND & CONQUER: RED ALERT 3

FORMAT: 360, PC (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: EALA PREVIOUSLY IN: E193





Though the need for multi-stage, multi-discipline assaults occasionally threatens to turn matches into attrition, players now have time to develop exuberant super-weapons and absurd hero units

"Do your dogs have guns?" a colleague asks. This is rarely a reasonable question, and it so happens that *Red Alert 3*'s dogs don't wield guns – but put them in a vehicle and you can bark enemies to death with giant sub-woofers. The Russians, meanwhile, have attack bears which can be fired from amphibious APCs, filling the sky with a canopy of growling parachutists.

It's difficult not to warm to *RA3*'s ingeniously lunatic world but, as Tim Curry's vowel-mangling Russian premier picks scenery from his teeth, you may wonder if the actual game has been buried in this giddy nonsense. However, while the series has always favoured delirious pace and excitement over po-faced strategy, *RA3* fosters greater unit biases towards sea, air and ground combat, making the game a trickier logistical exercise than previous instalments. An enemy base may be most susceptible to ground assault, but if it's separated from you by open water patrolled by deadly subs a much more diverse force is required to chaperone the traditional tank rush, often in stages, from one side of the map to the other.

There are some issues – the simple but vital act of selecting units is iffy, and every time a commander appears on the video screen your map is obscured and the current selection wiped. The singleplayer campaign's scripting and initial linearity somewhat undercut the emergent premise of the RTS, making it difficult to know if your overall strategy has succeeded or whether you simply hit a checkpoint initiating the enemy's withdrawal. But even so the gaudy madness of *RA3* continues to you draw you in, its battles a delirious strobing of colour, light and giant robots. It may not satisfy armchair warmongers used to *Supreme Commander*'s intimidating depths, but *RA3* never threatens to take itself that seriously, and nor would you want it to. **[7]**



The videos that bookend missions are superbly hammy, with George Takei, Peter Stormare, Jonathan Pryce and JK Simmons joining boggle-eyed Tim Curry as the warring leaders, while buxom starlets guide you through the battles



MANHUNT 2

FORMAT: PSP, PS2, WII (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: ROCKSTAR
DEVELOPER: ROCKSTAR LONDON PREVIOUSLY IN: E175, E177

The censors have ensured that this is no longer the game that Rockstar intended to release. Still, it takes only a gutter mind and a little deduction to realise that, even at the full extent of its ambition, *Manhunt 2* would have less to offer than its predecessor. A sneak 'em up of a slight kind, *Manhunt 2* has two strings to its bow: some passable light-and-dark stealthing and the ability to execute people with wet, splattery ultraviolence – making the player complicit through simulatory waves of the Remote.

These actions have been subject to the censor's snip, however. Instead of seeing deranged protagonist Daniel Lamb shatter someone's brain-pan with a manhole cover, the screen skews drunkenly into a red-and-black smear which obscures everything but the motion prompts. However you feel about the depiction of horrendous brutality, being deprived of all visual feedback would be just as unsatisfactory if the player were feeding someone a delicious pie rather than their own teeth.

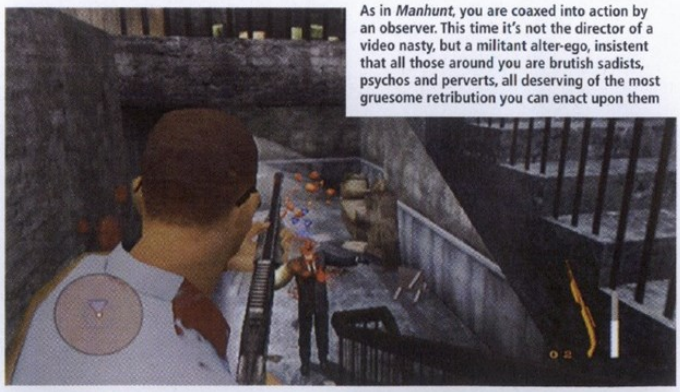
Combat outside of stealth executions is limited in the extreme. Get cornered by more than a couple of enemies and you won't be given a chance to stand, much less land one of your lethargic swings. Since death often means sitting through unskippable cutscenes, it's better to run away when spotted, leading enemies on farcical chases until they lose you in the shadows.



Despite the fact that your acts of murder are made incomprehensibly blurry, the sound effects give you a good idea of what's going on, with various crunches, gurgles and splatter

Despite the delays, *Manhunt 2* is unrefined. Corpses clip through walls making them impossible to pick up and hide – occasionally necessitating a reload when the game chooses to make this an objective. Another prevalent glitch sees things get stuck mid-animation, requiring much Remote jiggling to break the paralysis.

Ditching the self-aware snuff-movie set-up for an unsubtle conspiracy story, *Manhunt 2* lacks the redemption of a smart commentary on violence as entertainment. And with its gory heart now hacked out, there's even less to make it stand out. **[4]**



As in *Manhunt*, you are coaxed into action by an observer. This time it's not the director of a video nasty, but a militant alter-ego, insistent that all those around you are brutish sadists, psychos and perverts, all deserving of the most gruesome retribution you can enact upon them







SILENT HILL: HOMECOMING

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), FEBRUARY (UK) PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: DOUBLE HELIX PREVIOUSLY IN: E190, E194





Not every beastie gets to quite this size (main), but they're all in for a bit of a beating from Alex. *Homecoming*'s protagonist is extremely handy with his limited offensive options, and timed countering sees most enemies easily dismissed

Opinions vary on whether *Silent Hill*'s unnerving atmosphere is achieved because, or in spite of, the games being mechanically infuriating and defiantly obtuse. *Homecoming* seems to believe in the latter, since its combat is much improved over the wild swinging of old, and its narrative is illusive rather than elusive, with chilling moments and a well-developed protagonist.

Technically, things are creakier. The fog effect is, in short, abysmal. The lighting levels are misjudged, and even with continual adjustment prove frustrating, presenting blackness where darkness would be more appropriate. Enemies and NPCs walk into walls, your torch beam is so weak as to be almost useless, and characters in cutscenes speak with mouths apparently full of frozen toothpaste.





The story follows the link between Shepherd's Glen, Alex's hometown, and Silent Hill, where you end up. There's some deft work in the narrative, enough that the multiple endings seem a little unnecessary. One good one would have worked

Silent Hill's enemies were always grotty, but here they're often simply grot. Using Playboy models for nurses is an interesting choice, but the design of other foes vacillates between uninspired and uncomfortably gross. There's a dog with no skin. And, look at that, a pink humanoid body topped with a corpulent penis. Next to this particular example, and the game's penchant for rooms relating to your mother's psyche containing glistening holes filled with beetles, the odd bit of rotting totty comes as light relief.

The bosses are exceptions, each one a grotesque triumph. They're also part of *Homecoming*'s redemption, a story that is literal enough to get a handle on, but ambiguous and symbolically rich. It resonates through multiple playthroughs and seemingly innocuous locations, and when the game produces its finer moments – a descent into a scaffolded hell, and the otherworldly trap of Alex's family home – it hits a height that belies the porridge-like mess of the rest of the experience.

This is a deeply flawed game, but a fascinating one which makes you think as much as wince. Capcom may still be the biggest noise in survival horror, but Konami is hanging in there. **[6]**



TOM CLANCY'S ENDWAR

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: UBISOFT SHANGHAI
PREVIOUSLY IN: E177, E184, E191

The voice command might be a gimmick, but it's one that continues to excite long after most interactive novelties have grown tiresome. The execution is exemplary: hold the R-trigger to issue a command and then speak your will. The clutch of tight commands, constructed from a limited vocabulary, never leave you feeling tactically restricted.

The strength of the implementation is important because, initially at least, it distracts from the simplicity of the tasks at hand. Without being able to marvel at the voice recognition's eager accuracy, players might never push past the first few short and rudimentary missions.

To begin with, your three stock unit types – tanks, transports and gunships – enjoy a standard rock, paper, scissors relationship. Soon, however, this roster grows to seven and the matrix of tactical considerations multiplies.

On to this bedrock the game adds experience points that lead to rank promotions and improvements, as well as a credit system that facilitates the purchase of additional unit training, upgrades and secondary attacks. These ideas, many snatched from cousin genres, help create an experience that's unique yet familiar. Indeed, the attachment you form with your squadrons, learning their call signs and desperately trying to keep them alive to fight another day, is surprising, personalising what are usually impersonal resources. When a beloved unit is wiped out you lose more than just a clutch of statistics.



Each unit type costs the same, making the game's focus less about saving for the most statistically powerful option and more about intelligent understanding of the needs of the battlefield

The 20-hour singleplayer campaign has been demoted to being the third option on the game's start screen. Of primary concern here is the game's persistent global online battle, an evolution of the Risk-style metagame seen in Capcom's second *Steel Battalion*. You start by joining one of the three factions to the war (there's a credit incentive to join the side with the lowest percentage of Xbox Live players) and from there must fight for domination of the hexagon spaces that divide up the global map. It's here that Ubisoft Shanghai is hoping the game will find its longevity and the clear presentation and elegant framing of what is a complex and deep persistent online war should help realise these hopes.

Despite the game's bombastic, headline-grabbing ideas, *EndWar* is a game of underlying restraint. Its ideas are streamlined, its tight boundaries narrowing what could have been an overwhelming proposition, plunging players all the sooner into compelling strategic depths. **[8]**

Every unit has a four-section health bar, and when reduced to the final section it will be downed to await rescue. Successfully extract a unit from the battlefield and it will fight another day, but if destroyed it's lost forever



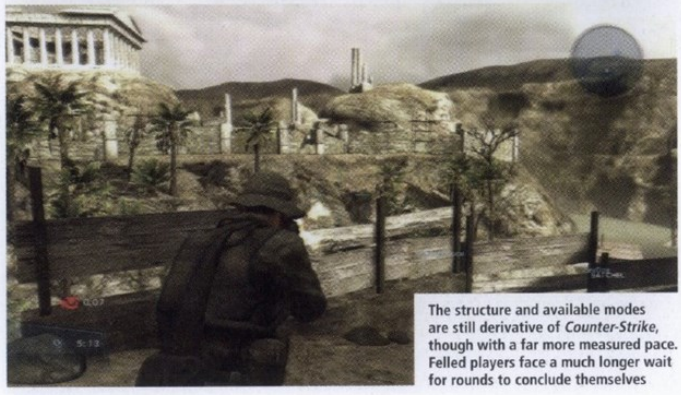


SOCOM CONFRONTATION

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 28
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: SLANT SIX GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E195







The structure and available modes are still derivative of *Counter-Strike*, though with a far more measured pace. Felled players face a much longer wait for rounds to conclude themselves

SCEA director of development Seth Luisi's assertion in 2007 that *SOCOM Confrontation* is 'not possible on any other console' begins to sound a little suspect to anyone presented with the technologically underwhelming finished article. Those feeling particularly cruel could point to an unimaginative adherence to the design principles of its series predecessors and suggest that perhaps one other console that could manage it would be Sony's own PlayStation 2.

In almost every area, *SOCOM Confrontation* feels like an anachronistic throwback, clinging with grim determination to the series' existing and loyal fanbase, but allowing no quarter for newcomers. The awkward default control system is a perfect example. With zooming assigned to the D-pad, simply drawing your rifle to your shoulder requires the release of the left stick. The game forces the sacrifice of agility for accuracy, with the added cost of a split-second delay. Slant Six might contest that this imposed clumsiness is a concession to realism, but the inclusion of multi-stage zooming on scopeless rifles is no less ludicrous than a convenient control system.

Graphically, *Confrontation* feels equally antiquated. Both characters and environments are regularly plastered with muddy, indistinct textures, presumably in deference to those downloading the title from the PlayStation Store. As a result, during long-range combat – the mastery of which is essential given the lethality of game's various munitions – targets are offered protection far beyond what their camouflage would afford them. It's a shame, as there's proficiency in the level design that simply isn't evident elsewhere. Multiple routes, imaginative geography and symmetry that avoids outright duplication appear to be the guiding principles, and it's this ethos that rescues *SOCOM* from complete obscurity.

Early network issues and an abortive US launch aside, the patient fans for which *Confrontation* has been produced will no doubt ultimately be satisfied with Slant Six's shot-for-lethal-shot remake of PS2-era *SOCOM*. It's the refusal to broaden the series' horizons, though, which will serve to damage Sony's oft-forgotten franchise most in the long run. It leaves *Confrontation* feeling stale and lost among the recent crowd of tac-shooters and, needless to say, the Clancy hive-mind has little to worry about yet. **[5]**



VALKYRIA CHRONICLES

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E195

Valkyria Chronicles is a smart answer to the question of how developers might break the strategy-RPG free of squared-off, gridded environments and rigid, boardgame structure. Instead, here is a wargame in which you take direct control of your units, running from sandbag to street corner, ducking behind cover, flanking enemy squadrons and lining up headshots, a far cry from the chess of *Shining Force* and *Disgaea*.

Indeed, the only clue that the underlying ruleset is anything but a thirdperson shooter is a big yellow Action Point gauge that depletes as you flit around the battlefield. When this gauge is emptied you're returned to an overhead map from where you must choose your next unit before returning once again to the field. Simple and elegant, it takes influences such as Konami's *Ring Of Red* and even Pandemic's *Full Spectrum Warrior* and elaborates on them to create something unique and interesting.

The setting and art style work in harmony with the mechanical innovation. Set in the Europe of The Sound Of Music, it's all pastel-green rolling hills, crayon-blue skies and carefree ambiance, something that's at odds with the storm clouds of world war gathering around its protagonists. The pencil-line graphics (a filter that shows up over any texture shading rather than a bespoke hand-drawn effect) and the scrapbook hub that collects cutscenes and missions as newspaper clippings round off a consistently tender art style that contrasts with the brutal subject matter and the slow-motion headshots during its battles.





Many classic SRPG tropes remain, such as having to clear a map within a set number of moves or ensuring that certain characters are kept alive, and these rules help ground the game's innovations in a familiar framework

From humble beginnings commanding a small squad of fighters, you soon take control of large battalion made up of scouts, snipers, shock troopers and engineers, each with their own roles, strengths and weaknesses. Rather than require you to command each and every unit during your 'turn', the game offers a set number of moves that can be spread among your team or, should you so desire, repeatedly spent on one or two characters.

The lack of multiplayer options and the frequently weak and heavily scripted AI dull the game's sheen but, nevertheless, this is one of Sega's recent experiments that has paid off, paving the way for yet more exploration of a genre that many have dismissed as having run its course. **[7]**

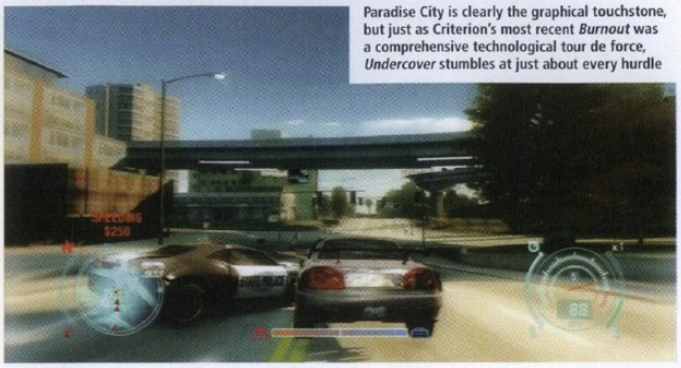
A unit can fire only once per move, but if you manage to manoeuvre a character into a prime spot you can spend all of your moves for that turn taking out enemies one by one





NEED FOR SPEED UNDERCOVER

FORMAT: PS3 (VERSION TESTED), 360, PC RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: BLACK BOX PREVIOUSLY IN: E195



Paradise City is clearly the graphical touchstone, but just as Criterion's most recent *Burnout* was a comprehensive technological tour de force, *Undercover* stumbles at just about every hurdle

While plausibility has rarely been top of the list of priorities in *Need For Speed*, from the moment tyre meets tarmac in *Undercover* there's a more concentrated sense of otherworldliness than ever before. Architecturally it's convincing enough, with the initial forest of skyscrapers and cranes painting a credible, if not particularly inspiring, picture of a rapidly swelling commercial district. The silence, though, is positively deafening.

Undercover's engine struggles to populate its urban sprawl, and indeed the countryside beyond, with anything more than a smattering of civilian traffic. Worse still, even this less-than-Herculean task is often too much of a stretch for the technology, and the framerate crashes to the floor on both PS3 and 360. Combine this with floaty handling which conveys no sense of weight or surface contact, plus the wide but vacant circuits, and the overwhelming impression is that of drifting detachedly through a dreamlike street-racing purgatory.

With the much-vaunted plot exceptionally poorly relayed through brief and rare cutscenes, you're denied human contact on a personal level as well. Hollywood headliner Maggie Q gives orders from a darkened room in what is presumably an otherwise unoccupied ivory skyscraper, and there are occasional and meaningless run-ins with local racers, but to call it a story is offering *Undercover* generosity it does nothing to deserve.

What's left in the centre of this tatty periphery is a nominally open-world racing game that's been severely undernourished. EA appears to have recognised the futility of exploration in this world, so races are eagerly offered up before the self-congratulatory glow of the previous victory has faded. As such, progression through the often anticlimactic challenges is a rapid but ultimately hollow experience. There's a half-hearted attempt at RPG-esque compartmentalised skill development, but with points assigned by the game rather than the player and little discernible effect on your ability to out-drive the rubber-banding, it's fated to be dismissed as a meaningless table of percentages rather than mistaken for depth. It's certainly no substitute for a considered difficulty curve, and the lack of one means many of the races are a lonely charge to the finish while your opponents squabble among themselves.

Technologically something of an embarrassment and devoid of any vitality or personality, *Undercover* seems a sharp downturn for one of EA's traditional bastions of seasonal sales. Still, it has some merit as a curio – who'd have thought *Need For Speed* would do as convincing a job of desolate wasteland as *Fallout 3*? **[3]**



Towards its second half, *Undercover* ventures out into the countryside. It's no less deserted, but at least there are some serpentine mountain roads to momentarily distract from the ennui



SHAUN WHITE SNOWBOARDING: ROAD TRIP

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Since its unveiling at last year's E3, the Nintendo Balance Board's manifest destiny has been a freeride into the skateboarding and snowboarding genre. Despite the inevitability, there's a pleasant surprise to be had on finding the first example of such a game to be so competent.

With the board positioned lengthways, the back foot is used to steer, shifting your weight on the front foot controls speed while pumping the board with both feet enables a jump. A combination of directional leaning on the board and button presses on the Remote has you performing tricks. Although initially difficult to master, the controls are tight and responsive and make for a game that captures the feeling of the sport with authenticity.

Although lacking the large-scale, go-anywhere mountain environments of its PS3 and 360 brethren, there's an agreeable range of events on offer for a lone player here, with races, half-pipe runs, off-piste item collecting and general trickery in five locations around the globe. The linear nature of the runs may appear tame next to the other versions, but the unique control system makes analogue sticks feel outdated.

Play without the board, however, and the controls are found wanting. Twisting the Remote to perform tricks feels simplistic and almost random in comparison, and points are so easy to accrue that the challenges on offer transform from acceptably taxing to benign. Only in the multiplayer modes, of which there are several, does non-board play feel balanced.



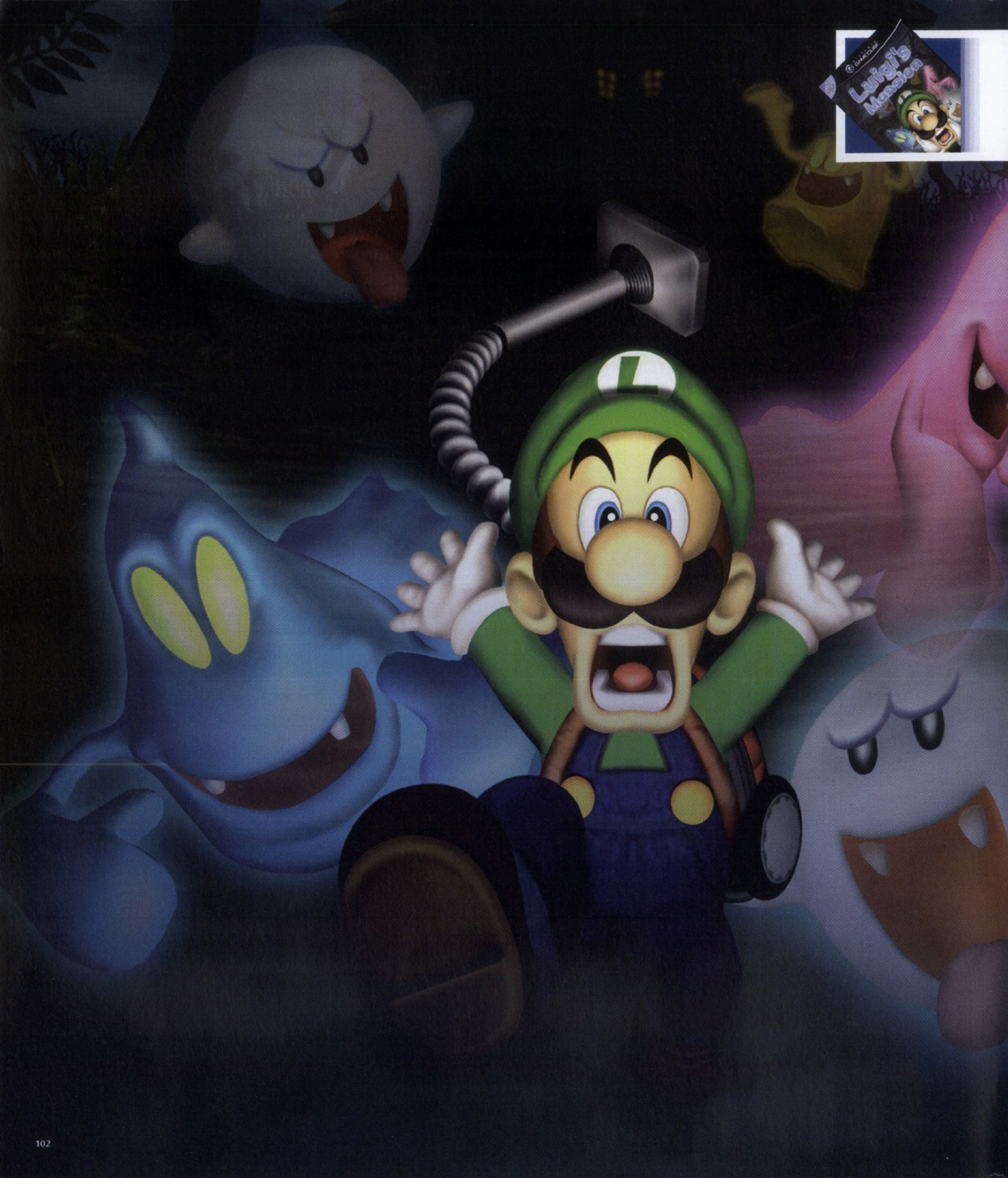


This is no lazy port: *Road Trip* has been developed from the ground up for Wii, and as such has little in common with the PS3, 360 and PC versions

Not only is *Road Trip* competent, it's full of character, with cartoon styling and gentle humour eschewing the too-cool, branding-heavy nature of its peers, while also being one of the console's better looking titles. Mention should also be made of the inspired soundtrack, which includes Blue Öyster Cult's Don't Fear The Reaper as its title track. The likes of *Tony Hawk*, *SSX* and *Skate* have a hard act to follow. **[7]**



Visual effects include motion blur and a snow-spattered camera when you bail; visually, it's smooth, crisp and detailed


Luigi's Mansion

TIME EXTEND

LUIGI'S MANSION

FORMAT: **GAMECUBE**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2001**

The world's most famous palette-swap takes centre stage as the Mushroom Kingdom gets a character-building taste of Raccoon City

It's fitting that *Luigi's Mansion* should have such a preoccupation with mirrors, given the game's determination to invert practically all the traditions people expect from a *Mario Bros* title. In almost every room of this haunted house, you'll come across some variation on a reflective surface, flipping the environment back to front, as the game itself turns your preconceptions on their heads. To put it more clearly, try all you want to but you won't be able to jump in *Luigi's Mansion*. In fact, that first stab at the A button will give you nothing more than the sound of Luigi shouting his brother's name – calling out to a familiar hero in a world in which nothing works quite the way it used to any more.

Luigi's Mansion may seem like a mirror-world twin to the subsequent instalment, *Super Mario Sunshine*, both sharing backpack gimmicks, a preoccupation with cleaning and an uncharacteristic focus on a more realistic setting (and it says a lot about the Mushroom Kingdom that you can call ghost houses and ice-cream-covered islands realistic). In reality, however, things quickly become more complicated. The story may be typically light (the brothers win a mansion in a competition they didn't enter, and Mario subsequently disappears) but the main gameplay sees your usual exploration severely curtailed, as Luigi is tasked with uncovering his brother's whereabouts by clearing a single building of ghosts, one room at a time, with only a Poltergust 3000 for help. Despite this limited agenda, *Luigi's Mansion* remains a surprising game, its most fundamental mystery – why Luigi? – revealing the workings of the Mario machine in an entirely unexpected light. While it could hardly be clearer that the game wants you to restore order to a chaotic world – it does, after all, present you with a vacuum cleaner at the outset – its deeper message might be that even the greatest template has limitations, and even the tidiest rule set needs to be thrown in the air every now and then.



The ghosts double as a metaphor for game machinery – NPCs fated to eternally repeat a handful of lines, or walk paths responding to ancient trigger points

Initially, the focus on Luigi doesn't seem terribly promising. Mario may have been designed by necessity and limitations – his moustache added to turn a fuzzy clump of pixels into a recognisable face, his hat to avoid animating hair – but Luigi blinked into existence entirely accidentally. Mario's brother was originally nothing more than a re-skinned sprite to provide an avatar for Player Two, and in the years that followed very little else was added. Luigi was the thinner one, and had a slightly different jump at times, but he remained a cipher, someone you most often ended up with when you didn't pick Mario in time. The idea of basing an entire game around him was a little like writing a novel about the red Koopa Troopa.

Luigi remained a cipher. The idea of basing an entire game around him was a little like writing a novel about the red Koopa Troopa



Luigi's Mansion's cloth and particle effects generate a remarkable amount of physics chaos. Other technical flourishes include a selection of realistic mirrors

And the choice of hero wasn't to be the only shock in store. *Luigi's Mansion* also does away with years of accrued tradition, ditching platforming, the hub structure of *Mario 64*, and the bright, sunny environments the audience was used to. The result is a *Mario Bros* game



DID YOU HEAR THAT?

Luigi's Mansion's **soundtrack is varied and quietly brilliant, shifting from Ed Wood Theremins and funny – yet somehow also musical – sound effects, to tense harpsichord pieces and bouts of hip-hop at a moment's notice. Dazzlingly clever at the time – and still rarely copied – Luigi will even sing along with the music at various stages of the game as he wanders around the mansion, his chattering performance providing a barometer of his state of mind.**



unlike any before or since: Luigi's adventure is quick to head into some very unexpected territory.

Surprisingly, more often than not, it turns out to be territory other games have already explored. From the door-opening animations that parody *Resident Evil* to the room unlocking and weapon upgrading structure, recalling *Metroid* and *Castlevania*, the game also invokes regular memories of *Zelda* with its tightly focused puzzles and treasure chests. But there are other, more distant, references too, from the fishing game mechanic of the ghost-capturing, to the *Robotron*-like rooms such as The Artist's Studio, which pits Luigi against waves of ghosts, all requiring specific tactics to defeat.

Everywhere, there's a distinct sense of school-holiday freedom to the game, at odds with its claustrophobic location. It's as if in seeing a chance, however brief, to break from a model that has been evolving for the best part of two decades, the team has suddenly decided to cram a thousand other game styles in. But *Luigi's Mansion* never simply steals ideas; it always offers a twist. *Resident Evil*'s scary doors look pleasantly ridiculous with Luigi's puffy Mickey Mouse glove quavering at the handle, and Samus' progress was rarely made possible by finding a key wedged above a toilet.







Boss encounters, though few in number, are surprisingly strong, including an ink-splattered graveyard fight and a battle against a giant spectral baby with a rocking-horse fixation

Even more surprisingly for such a slight game, *Luigi's Mansion* also manages to find the time to lampoon numerous cinematic horror traditions. Ghostbusters may be the most obvious reference point, but on a more primal level the game hinges on the scary movie staple of repeatedly asking what lies behind the next door. Its separate rooms become discrete dioramas exploring every trick in the book, from something nasty lurking beyond a shower curtain to levitating crockery and a floating candelabra. It's unlikely that the finished product would scare even young children, but it's certainly got the pacing right for some expert shocks, from the jolt of a ghoul popping up where you least expect it to the lights going out and all hell breaking loose when you're caught in a tight corner.

It's certainly got the pacing right for some expert shocks, from the jolt of a ghoul popping up to the lights going out and all hell breaking loose

Yet it's the setting that all this invention is squeezed into which is perhaps the most astonishing element. Rather than the traditional handful of elaborately different worlds, *Luigi's Mansion* is focused on depicting a single coherent place. And even though its rooms allow for at least one ice level, they remain consistent with one another despite the variety. Even the observatory that takes Luigi into space begins as a recognisable wood-panelled study, and elsewhere the wallpaper, fittings, doors, and mouldings all help to reinforce just one, very specific, location.

And while the environment is small, it's unusually responsive. You can use your Poltergust to tug sheets off beds or cloths off tables, and send water slopping out of a sink. You can even use it to actually do a spot of cleaning, sucking dust from shelves and cobwebs down from ceilings. And although you're ostensibly alone, each room is crammed with dozens of spooks, ranging from simple Boos to the elaborate character ghosts, each one a mini-boss with a story to unravel and a weakness to exploit. With this amount of chaos on screen at any one time, there's more than a hint of tech demo to the game.

Ultimately, it was Luigi himself who made all this possible. That apparently jokey reversal – Mario kidnapped and in need of rescue for once – is far from simple playfulness. Rather, it provides an excellent excuse to sidestep years of traditions and, more importantly, expectations. Luigi becomes useful precisely because of who he isn't, and it's who he isn't that really allows Nintendo's EAD team to explore new types of gameplay with no fear of potentially tarnishing its most valuable mascot.



Captured ghosts are stored in the Portrait Gallery, after being put back in their frames by Professor E Gadd







Clearing a room turns the lights back on, and will calm Luigi down somewhat. His quaking idle animations contain all the charm the *Mario* series is famous for



This results in a game that moves the series not forwards but sideways. Nintendo was hardly planning not to make a conventional *Mario* title again – it was, after all, already hard at work on *Sunshine*. Instead, *Luigi's Mansion* should take its place alongside connectivity cables and the Virtual Boy hardware as a sign of a company exploring just how much experimentation its audience were prepared to take. No matter how imaginative Mario's adventures could be, the customs they had created were inevitably constrictive. Luigi provided pure freedom, a chance to rebuild the world, just once, to a different design. No platforms, no Goombas, no desert or fire levels. In their place a controlled burst of creativity that can be dismissed in the morning as nothing more than a strange dream. *Sunshine* may have taken Mario on holiday, but Luigi allowed the development team to take a holiday from Mario.

It helped that there had never been a better time to experiment. Nintendo entered the GameCube era in second place: Sony had won the last round, and the wildcard of Microsoft was about to be played. Uncertainty was in the air, and if there was ever an opportunity to show that Miyamoto's team was capable of trying something different, this was surely it.

Suddenly, the deep self-referencing scattered throughout *Luigi's Mansion*, occasionally slapped on a little thick, starts to make sense. From quizzes regarding a previous game's theme tune to real-world winks like the Game Boy Horror, or an unexpectedly familiar sound effect which has you rummaging around in your brain for its origin, this haunted house turns up an awful lot of nostalgic allusions. And the reason is because, deep down, this isn't really a *Mario* game in any other way. Underneath the familiar faces, *Luigi's Mansion* is actually more of a repurposed thirdperson shooter than the platform game everyone was expecting, a suggestion that after the relative failure of the N64, Nintendo thought there was a real possibility that players might want an occasional break from jumping around.

And yet, while *Luigi's Mansion* sold, it was met with gentle confusion from many quarters. The real turning point for Nintendo was not this game, nor *Sunshine*, nor even last year's gloriously youthful *Galaxy*, but the unassuming *New Super Mario Bros.* It's the success of that pleasant throwback, simply by returning to a framework made golden by nostalgia, that seems likely to really keep Mario hostage in the years ahead, and means we're probably not going to see more risky, midnight innovation again any time soon. Luigi's adventure may be doomed to remain one of a kind, as charming, distinct, and eventually dust-shrouded as the mansion itself. We'd ask for a sequel, if that wasn't going against the ethos that created the game in the first place.



IT'S-A ME, LUIGI!

Many critics pointed out that, with the haunted house setting requiring a certain amount of fear from its protagonist, for the first time in his life Luigi actually had a character of his own: the frightened brother who enters the fray quaking and eager to run away. It's something other games have since picked up on, most notably *Superstar Saga* for the GBA, which provides Luigi with ample opportunities to attempt an escape before going on a dangerous adventure. Elsewhere, Intelligent Systems has also developed upon the game's notion of having Luigi as a free agent, with *Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door* sending him off on a parallel (and equally ridiculous) mission to Mario's own, for which he stops back in town to offer updates every few hours – typically sending his brother to sleep.





THE MAKING OF...
DUNE II: BATTLE FOR ARRAKIS

The realtime building of a base, a dynasty and a genre

FORMAT: **AMIGA, MEGA DRIVE, PC** PUBLISHER: **VIRGIN INTERACTIVE** DEVELOPER: **WESTWOOD STUDIOS** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **1992**

It is rare indeed for a single game to become the progenitor of an entire new genre. Although it had its precedents, with some fans attempting to retcon a gaggle of faintly similar 8bit titles for the role, the world's first realtime strategy game can be named with little real controversy.

But going back to *Dune II* today is an eye-opening experience, as it becomes clear how very little the genre has moved forwards in the last 16 years – like finding out *Halo* had really been released in 1982. The same basic viewpoint, interface, controls and gameplay underpinning *Dune II* are still being reused today, with only the most minimal level of evolutionary advancement.

Lacking any of the hexes or grid squares of contemporary turn-based strategies, *Dune II* was loosely based upon the David Lynch movie, at least in terms of visual design. The gameplay featured three different factions (one invented for the game) all









Later maps can be large, with multiple enemy camps to be scouted and eliminated. Your base must also be guarded with fixed emplacements

with individual structures, units and superweapons. Although it is hard to appreciate now, being able to control each directly with the mouse – simply by pointing and clicking wherever you want them to move to or attack – was revolutionary. As was the need to harvest spice to act as the resource that feeds the expansion of your army.

"The inspiration for *Dune II* was partly from *Populous*, partly from my work on *Eye Of The Beholder* and the final and perhaps most crucial part came from an argument I once had with Chuck Kroegel, then vice president of Strategic Simulations Inc," recalls Westwood Studios co-founder and *Dune II* producer **Brett Sperry**.

"Herzog Zwei was a lot of fun, but I have to say the other inspiration for Dune II was the Apple Macintosh software interface"

"The crux of my argument with Chuck was that wargames sucked because of a lack of innovation and poor design. Chuck felt the category was in a long, slow decline, because the players were moving to more exciting genres," explains Sperry. "I felt that the genre had a lot of potential – the surface was barely scratched as far as I was concerned, especially from a design standpoint. So I took it as a personal challenge and figured how to harness realtime dynamics with great game controls into a fast-paced wargame."

Technosoft's 1990 Mega Drive game *Herzog Zwei* is often labelled as a primary inspiration for *Dune II*, but according to Sperry greater influence came from a more mundane source. "*Herzog Zwei* was a lot of fun, but I have to say the other inspiration for *Dune II* was the Mac software interface. The whole design/interface dynamics of mouse clicking and selecting desktop items got me thinking, 'Why not allow the same inside the game environment? Why not a context-sensitive playfield? To hell with all these hot keys, to hell with keyboard as the primary means of manipulating the game!'"

The influence of MacOS (at the time the text interface of MS-DOS still held equal ground with Windows on PCs) on Sperry is perhaps unsurprising given his initial game industry experience as an Apple II programmer.

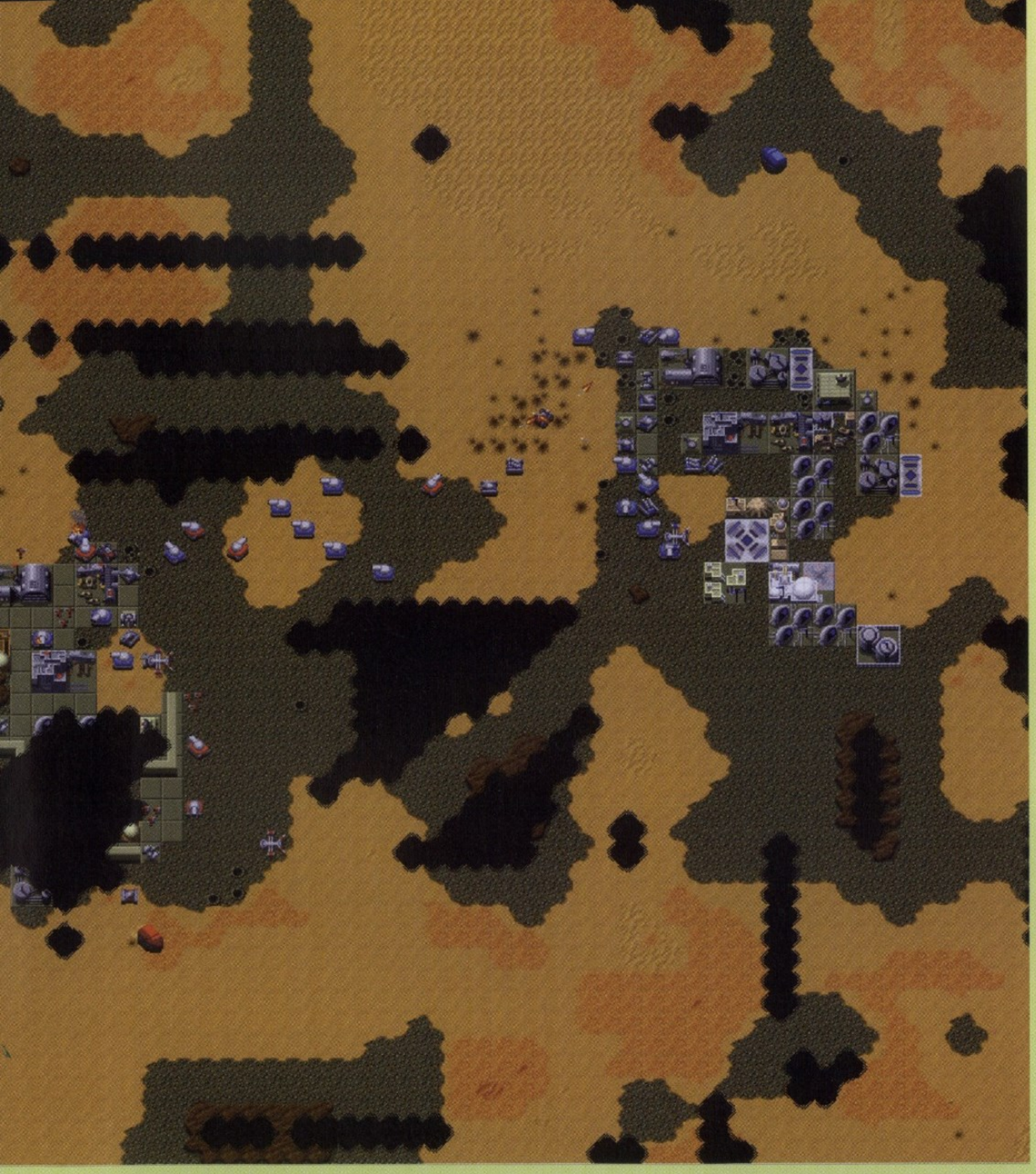
"I started programming in high school when I was 16 years old and initially I did ports to the Apple II, some utilities and six 'edu-games'. My first big game was called *Terra 12* but it was never published. Around 1984 I met Louis Castle during a port of *Impossible Mission* for the Apple II that I was working on. Louis did most of the art and animation on that project. In fact, after seeing his superior artwork, that was the end of my computer art career!

"Louis and I started Westwood Studios in March of 1985 as a 16bit game company. Our early games were for the Amiga and the Atari ST. We were a three-man shop initially [with programmer Barry Green]. Louis did all the artwork, all three of us were programming, and each of us did some of the audio work."

Sperry stopped programming in 1987, though, as the demands of design work, running the new company and overseeing production on all of Westwood's games was all becoming too much. "With the rise of the



A failed tank rush can see hours of careful harvesting, building and preparation wasted. With the construction yard still intact, the enemy will quickly rebuild other destroyed buildings, so it's imperative that you make every vehicle count





SONG OF DUNES

Although to this day realtime strategy games struggle to remain visually appealing, *Dune II*'s audio achievements were significant, including an interactive music score and an unusual amount of digitised speech for the era (even if it was a choice between the two until a patch was released). "The audio aspect is at least 50 per cent of the magic in game design," asserts Sperry. "*Dune II* was way ahead of its time in this regard thanks to Paul Mudra and Frank Klepacki, and Westwood Studios was unusual for having an internal audio group as most developers used external contractors – but that was how important I felt the aural aspect of gaming was."

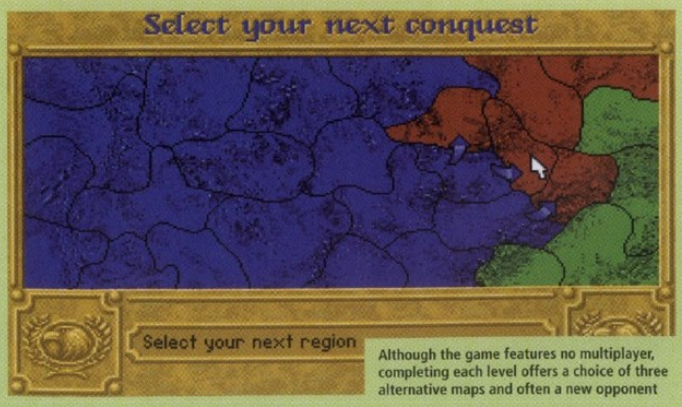
In keeping with the rest of the game, much of the audio design was only vaguely outlined at the beginning of the project. "A lot of the audio design wasn't planned out at the start. I kept breaking internal deadlines with my requests for more sounds, especially to reinforce the interface and feedback to the user," says Sperry. "A lot of this happened during the polishing phase – often the most exciting parts of game design are unknowable until you reach a certain stage. The secret is to hold back from publishing the game until you have the time to consider and implement so many finishing touches. It's often a very costly phase, but so worth it!"

16bit machines, the rules and standards changed dramatically. We actually had to hire two artists and an audio guy. Almost overnight the industry went from one- and two-man teams, to groups of five or six."

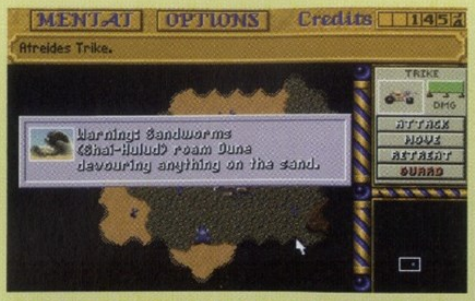
Apart from proving that some things in the game industry never change, Sperry also recalls that by the same period he was getting bored with programming: "For me, game conceptualisation and design was the hardest and the most exciting job of all, and I was jealous of any time I spent away from doing that."

Conceptualisation of *Dune II* itself began with an approach from Martin Alper, president of Virgin Games. "Martin asked what I thought about Frank Herbert's Dune books and the Dune movie," remembers Sperry. "I loved the books and I loved David Lynch's movie as well, and I told him as much. Martin told me he had locked up the licence years ago and I could use it if I wished."

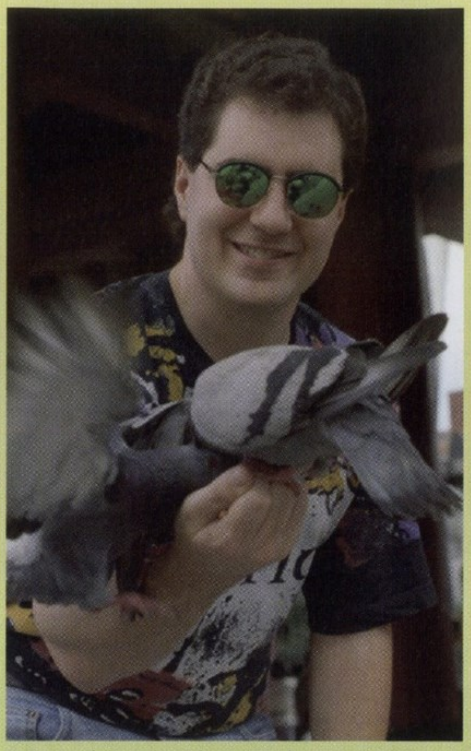
Alper's comments to Sperry had been made with the



Although the game features no multiplayer, completing each level offers a choice of three alternative maps and often a new opponent









Brett Sperry during a trip to Tokyo in 1999 (above). In addition to the *Dune* and *Command & Conquer* games, Westwood would make the *Eye Of The Beholder* titles, an adaptation of *Blade Runner* that made the cover of **Edge**, and an uncredited PC port of *Resident Evil*

RETURN TO DUNE?

EA's closure of Westwood Studios in 2003, only five years after acquiring it, led to Sperry concentrating on his interests in art, architecture and photography. "I'm very active in the Las Vegas arts community and I'm going to open a contemporary art gallery there this fall," he reveals. "The architectural design for the gallery is all my own, and aside from a few home remodels this will be my first commercial building. I've been a fine art photographer for most of my life, but I've rarely shown my work publicly. With this new gallery maybe it's time to let others see how I see the world."

Nevertheless, Sperry continues to act as an occasional consultant to game companies on gameplay dynamics, conceptualisation and business development – but he is reluctant to detail which games or companies this has involved (although it isn't EA). "In the realtime strategy/wargaming genre I must confess that I've had a game design or two rattling around in my head for several years. Outside of wargames, I'm kicking around some ideas that could be described as casual entertainments and incidental delights that could be exciting on Xbox, Wii or even an iPhone. Maybe I should start a new game company and let one of these ideas come alive..."

understanding that work by French developer Cryo on a Dune-themed adventure/strategy hybrid had already been cancelled. As Sperry later found out, however, Cryo hadn't taken no for an answer. "They rushed to finish their game before ours," he reveals. "The result was a branding nightmare – the Cryo game had nothing to do with ours and yet it was published first because Virgin was anxious for the revenue. Against my violent protests our game was called *Dune II: The Building Of A Dynasty* [*Battle For Arrakis* in Europe and for the Mega Drive version] and the rest is history."

Initial development was hardly any less problematic, as Sperry recounts: "Joe Bostic was my lead programmer, and I remember telling him about how I wanted the units to move around on the battlefield and the basics of combat. And so he put it all together, and the resultant game was really boring!"

At this stage, though, the game bore little resemblance to the final product, with only four to eight units fighting on each side. "When we played with it, the whole game was over in no time. So we worked in obstacles on the battlefield and later production dynamics, the base and unit construction, and the fog of war effect. The production dynamics were partly inspired by *Civilization*. Sid [Meier]'s production dynamics gave me ideas on how to make *Dune II* more interesting."

> **"When I focus on watching others play, I learn more about game design. It's still a source of endless fascination for me"**

According to Sperry there was no fleshed-out game design and development was largely organic. "I wasn't very good at communicating what I saw in my mind," he admits. "I knew how I wanted the controls and interface to work very clearly, but some of the unit dynamics and pacing were still murky. So we basically built the game iteratively and the design documents were often made up as we went along."

This open-ended approach to game design is clearly how Sperry prefers to work, admitting that today he spends more time as a voyeur than a player. "When I focus on watching others play, I learn more about game design and entertainment, what's working, what's frustrating and how much or little players are willing to put up with and why. Game design and gamer interaction is still a source of endless fascination for me."

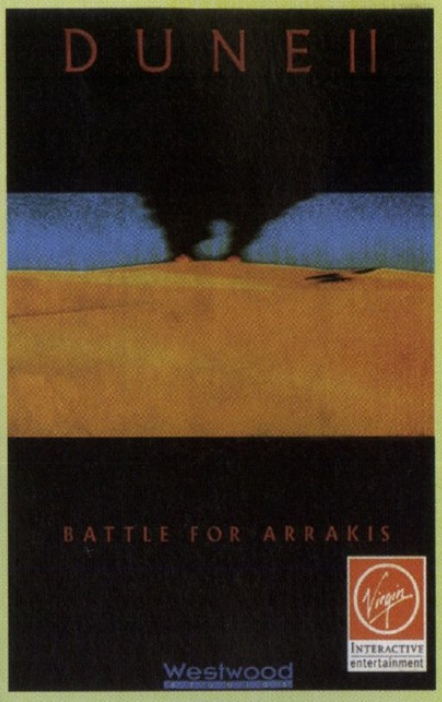
Sperry describes *Dune II*'s core challenge as "combining combat, exploration and production at a particular pace and rhythm to make it all exciting and almost out of control. That was a key part of what made it so addictive." Indeed, the experience was quite unlike more staid turn-based strategies, where success or failure rolled in slowly rather than rushing over sand dunes at the speed of an action game.

"You had to think and respond fairly quickly, and in realtime, or else your base and forces would all be overrun. And as we developed the game further, it became clearer how the pacing



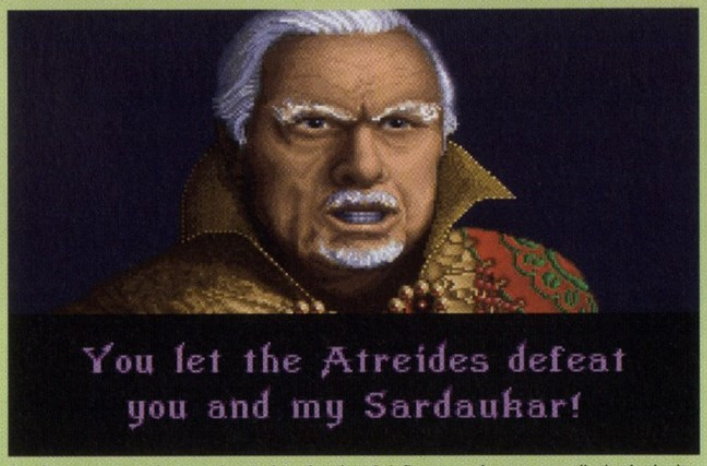
Destroying an enemy construction yard is the key to every strategy, its removal worth any sacrifice. Having back-up yards and transformable Mobile Construction Vehicles becomes vital in later levels





and battle scenario design were all a delicate balance."

In spite of concern over the obscure title the game was an immediate hit when released in 1992. "We called *Dune II* a 'realtime strategy' game – we did that to make it clear to software retailers and users that we had something new," says Sperry, who seems to have been afforded the rare chance to not only create a new genre but to name it as well. "But it was a wargame at heart. You built and managed units and took out the other side. Once people tried the game, they were hooked, and soon *Dune II* was a huge commercial success."



Your first encounter with enemy Siege Tanks makes clear their firepower advantage over all other land units and may well lead to a mission failure screen. The only thing bigger is the Harkonnen's exclusive Devastator

As work on the game came to a close, Sperry was working on its successor: "I was evolving my designs and figuring out how to streamline the interface even more. I had developed a new game and mythos with a modern-day setting, and that's how *Command & Conquer* was born."

Although *Dune II* earned itself two sequels – a remake in 1998 named *Dune 2000* and the more favourably received sequel *Emperor: Battle For Dune* in 2001 – it is the *Command & Conquer* series that is the game's true legacy. The series is still the most successful realtime strategy franchise today and its debt to Westwood's original games is immediately obvious.

Sperry has little to offer in support of subsequent entries in the genre, though. "The few wargames I've played lately have left me uninspired," he admits. "I don't really recognise the realtime strategy genre as such on consoles.

"That said, gaming today is still fun and exciting to me personally. I play *World Of WarCraft* with some friends on a PvP server. I thoroughly enjoyed *BioShock* and I still play *Mario Kart* from time to time. Mostly social games and multiplayer games are what appeal to me. The quality of games is still a mixed bag despite all the new technology. But hasn't it always been like this? In music, literature and film we see the same thing – lots on offer, but a pretty small number of exciting gems each year. And I can assure you that, like other entertainments, every game project starts out as something new and exciting in its creator's minds. But without a great design, critical feedback and a solid team, it's still a dicey outcome."



Sperry's interest in photography unfortunately kept him behind the camera for this team photo in the original *Dune II* manual

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Form follows function

After seven years of experimentation, game user interface tool company Scaleform has become an overnight success story



Brendan Iribe, CEO, Scaleform

They call it the 'first penguin problem'. It's named after that stock scene from all Antarctic documentaries where the penguins shuffle toward the ice's edge and then bravely push one of their number into the sea to check if there are any predators lurking. Transposed to the slightly less bloody games tool and middleware market, it's said to define the problem a startup company has securing its first sale. It seems that no matter what technology you're offering, no game developer wants to be the first to actually use it in a game. Once someone else has shipped a game using it, however, especially if it's a successful game, then the game-making penguins are keen to get in on the action.

No matter what technology you're offering, no game developer wants to be the first to actually use it

That's certainly the way things panned out for US user interface company Scaleform. "You definitely need a champion and it really helps if it's a big company," says **Brendan Iribe**, Scaleform's co-founder and CEO. "Crytek looked at our product critically for several years before using it in *Crysis*. Then we got a call from the BioWare-Pandemic guys who wanted to license it for all their titles. At that stage, we knew we had a product people wanted and it was time to ramp up the company."

Told in this manner, Scaleform would seem to be the sort of overnight success story that scores multiple business awards and magazine covers. Of course, little in life is quite so seamless, and Iribe is happy to recall the company's early cul-de-sac years as well. Originally, Scaleform was set up to make games. Together with college friend Michael Antonov,

www.scaleform.com



Scaleform's GFx technology uses vector graphics that are hardware accelerated using triangle-based tessellation. Using GFx and its Flash scale9Grid technology, developers can make resizable interface components such as windows, panels or buttons

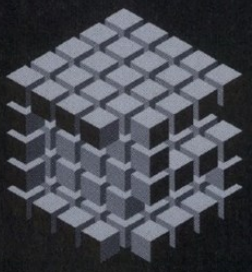


In conjunction with multiplayer technology company GameSpy, Scaleform released the Scaleform Lobby tool



Every game needs some form of user interface, and Scaleform's GFx is designed to make the creative process as streamlined as possible. One growing area of business for Scaleform is MMOGs, which involve the creation of a huge number of different types of menu screens





now the company's CTO, Iribe started to play around with the technology they thought this attempt would require.

"Early on, we saw there was a deficiency in terms of visual tools for creating a user interface, so we worked on it and decided bringing a solution such as Flash to the games market would be successful," Iribe recalls. "Of course, we didn't know how hard it would be. After four years of attempting to make our own version of Flash Studio, we started talking to developers and decided to make a UI engine powered by Flash instead. Even then it was another three years of development before we released the first version of GFx."

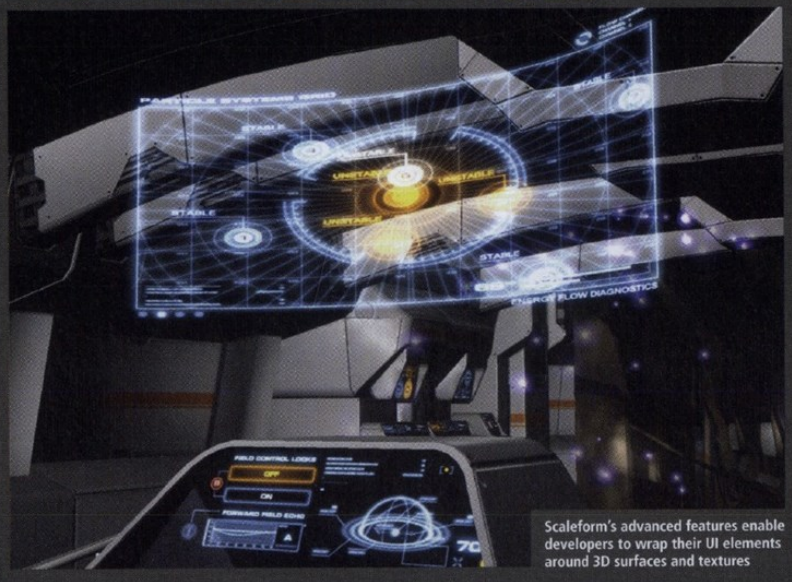
Simply put, GFx provides a way of enabling developers to easily create user interfaces for games using the industry-standard Adobe Flash technology, supporting features such as anti-aliasing. Or, more fully, the company's own description of GFx is: 'a lightweight high-performance rich media vector graphics and user interface engine that combines the scalability and development ease of proven visual authoring tools, such as Adobe Flash Studio, with the latest hardware graphics acceleration that game developers demand'.

But in terms of the bang for buck it offers, GFx sits in the sweetspot of game middleware. For one thing, since rival Anark sold its Gameface technology to Nvidia, Scaleform is pretty much in a monopolistic position. Second, creating UI technology has never been a priority for developers, which is why, though they know it shouldn't be so, UI has always been something of an afterthought for games. Finally, because it uses Flash, artists understand how to use GFx, and because it's integrated into some game engines, programmers find it straightforward, too. There's even a version released in conjunction with GameSpy specifically designed for multiplayer lobby interfaces.

And these are the reasons Iribe can describe Scaleform as the world's fastest-growing middleware company. "We signed over 50 games in the first eight months from our launch in March 2006," he states. "In 2007, we signed 120 games, and this year we're on track to be in 200 new games. By the end of 2008, between 300 and 400 games will be using our technology. I think 16 or 17 of the top 20 publishers are using us."

Which is all very nice, but soon gamers should start to see the benefits as well. "I think user interfaces will be treated with a lot more respect in future because developers can now hand the UI over to a creative art team that knows how to use Flash rather than a C++ programmer who would really rather be coding the physics and so keeps it simple, as often happened in the past," he explains. "You'll see this in the new wave of games, I hope. We're not there yet, because we've only had 30 games out to date, but using GFx enables people to do advanced things such as make 3D user interfaces or an animated UI that's rendered on to a 3D surface."

Let's just hope there's plenty of penguins out there.

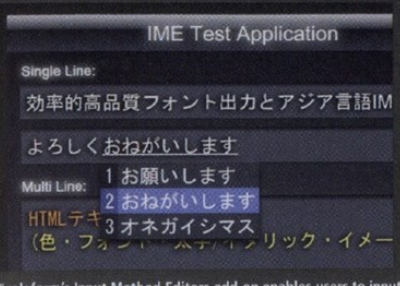


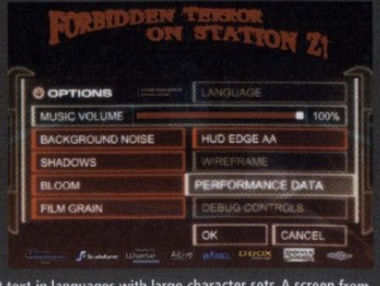
Scaleform's advanced features enable developers to wrap their UI elements around 3D surfaces and textures

What's next for Scaleform?

Something of the consummate businessman, Iribe has plenty of plans for Scaleform. First off is world domination. "It's not really world domination. It's domination of UI in the games space," he jokes. "Every game needs fonts, text and icons. We're providing a UI solution and we need to do it globally." For that reason, Scaleform is setting up its Asian operations with all documentation, support and websites being localised into Korean, Chinese and Japanese. Each territory will have full-time sales staff to spread the word.

Iribe is also looking at complementary technologies, and one interesting area he's targeting is localisation tools. "User interface, fonts, text and localisation go really well together," he points out. "When you localise a game most of your efforts and problems concern the text, and we can offer an affordable, effective, streamlined process that helps manage it. A simple example: with the click of a button we can automatically check for text overruns in every language. That's a huge saving right there."





Scaleform's Input Method Editors add-on enables users to input text in languages with large character sets. A screen from a tech demo by engine company Emergent (right) demonstrates how GFx works in conjunction with the Gamebryo engine

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

■ **COMPANY NAME:** Guerrilla Games

■ **DATE FOUNDED:** 2000

■ **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 140

■ **KEY STAFF:** Hermen Hulst (managing director) and Arjan Brsussee (development director)



■ **URL:** www.guerrilla-games.com

■ **SOFTOGRAPHY:**
Shellshock: Nam '67, Killzone, Killzone Liberation







***Killzone 2*, in which ISA troops assault the Helghast home planet, is due to be released in early 2009**



■ **LOCATION:**
Amsterdam,
The Netherlands

■ **CURRENT PROJECTS:**
Killzone 2

■ **ABOUT THE STUDIO**

"Founded in 2000 as the result of a merger between three small game development studios, Guerrilla now employs 140 developers. Outstanding technology and a strong artistic vision have elevated the company to a prominent rank among Europe's game developers. After the successful release of *Killzone* for PlayStation 2, Guerrilla was acquired by Sony Computer Entertainment in 2005. It went on to release the critically acclaimed *Killzone: Liberation* for PSP, and is currently working on *Killzone 2* for PlayStation 3, which is due for release in February 2009.

"Guerrilla is committed to recruiting, developing and retaining the best talent in the industry. Under the banner of the 'United Nations of Guerrilla', employees from 20 different nationalities work to achieve incredibly high production standards. It's not all work and no play, however, as the company has an in-house massage therapist, a gourmet chef, and weekly Friday Frag Fests. And while Guerrilla benefits from the SCE Worldwide Studios network, it has made sure to retain the culture of an independent developer.

"In contrast to its informal atmosphere, the company is based in a very regal 17th century canal mansion in the heart of Amsterdam. As one might expect, the garden house, the oldest in Amsterdam, has been converted into a movie-grade screening room."



Guerilla's genteel Amsterdam HQ, the birthplace of a race of gas-masked mutants packing heavy weaponry



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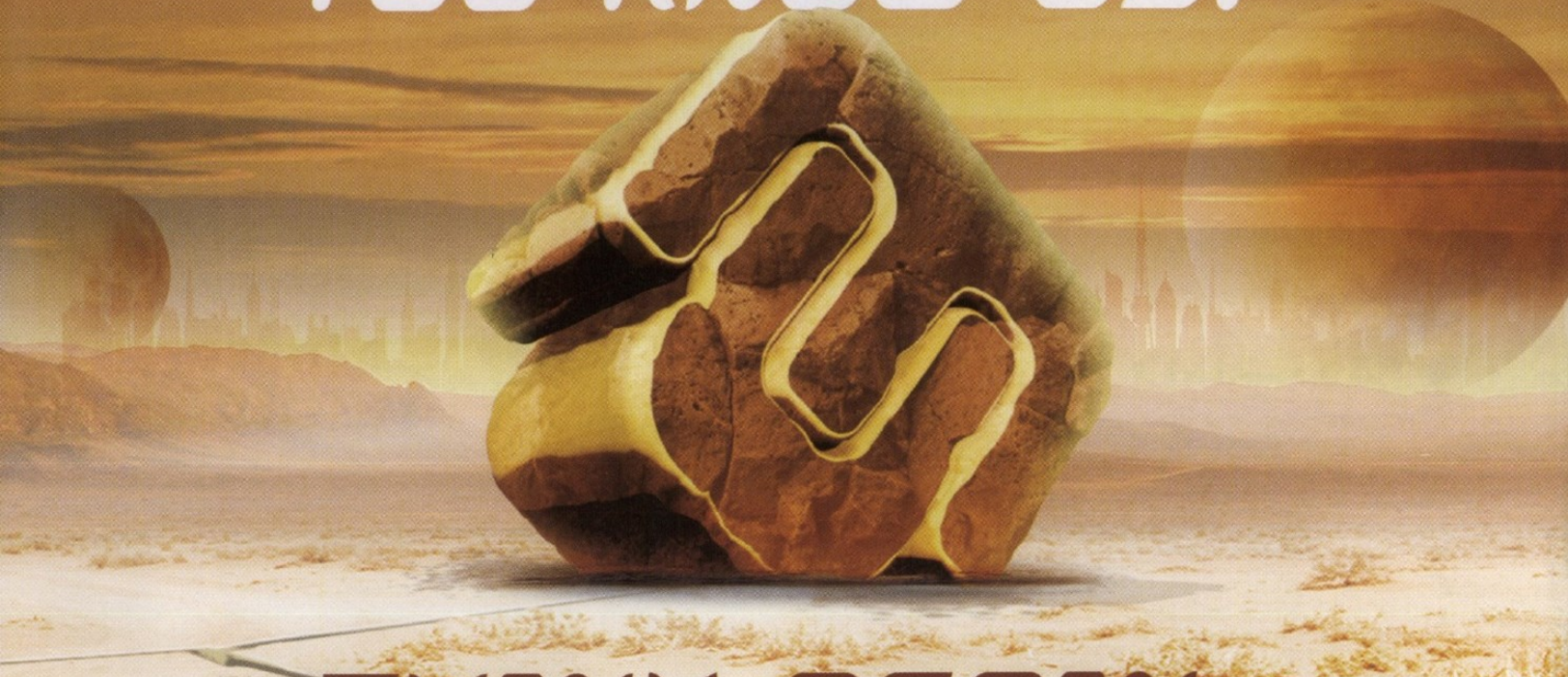
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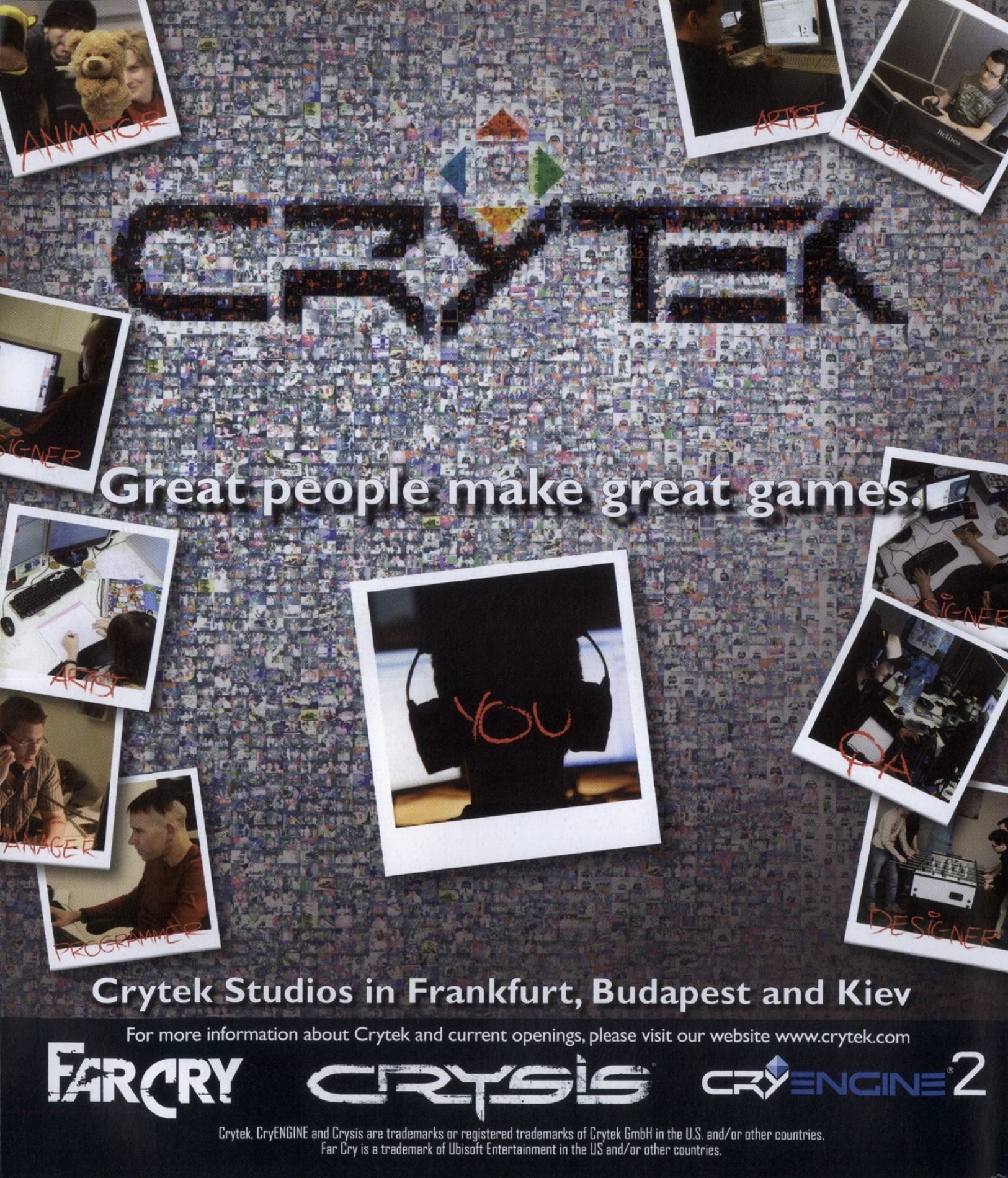
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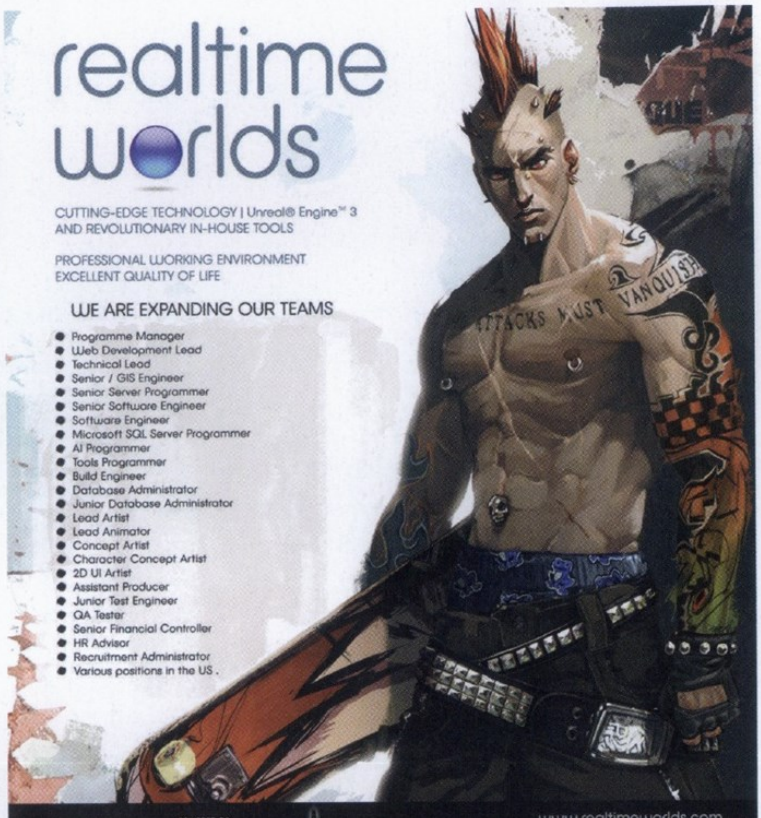
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BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

A few of my least favourite things

Videogames. There's so much to love, and yet there's so much to ridicule. As a player, encountering one of the old chestnuts is deflating. As a designer, I stress that all this reliance on unimaginative solutions blocks our ability to evolve beyond them. Just to keep it fresh, I'm going to avoid talking about crates. Harshing on crates is too cliché.

Health packs: One design challenge with combat gameplay is resolving the need to support partial failure against the need for fictional consistency. Suppose you've decided that gaping axe wounds don't stick around and heal over the course of several weeks. Therefore it follows that eating fried chicken every 20 minutes makes wounds close up like a blessed miracle. I'm sure you've noticed that the regulars at KFC are always jumping around and whipping candles.

> "Someday we'll figure out how to make a vent that takes you from the intro straight to the last room of the game"

Vent gameplay: Everyone wants choice and freedom in their game. As an example, either you can confront the challenges or, since it's such an open-ended game, you can avoid the gameplay entirely by pounding around in an enormous aluminium tube. Someday, to really capitalise on this design feature, we'll figure out how to make a vent that takes you from the intro straight to the last room.

Swaying idle animations: Idle animations add life to scenes when characters are just standing around. It was clever when Sonic kicked the dust off his shoes the first time, but now all the townsfolk in *Zelda* are constantly swaying back and forth hypnotically. What's the deal, do they have to go potty? Did they spend most of their lives on boats? Are they about to perform a cobra strike? They make me dizzy.

The handler: I know I'm just a lost, confused player, but maybe you could find some way to help me stay on track other than an invisible, omniscient being lurking over my shoulder and talking me through every situation I wind up in. It's creepy. What if I have to go to the bathroom? "Look around, the flush button might be a floor switch. Push 1 because you only took a leak."

Fighting is the only way we can think to get the player involved: Violence is bad. World leaders are blinded by bloodlust. Watch this half-hour movie about nuclear proliferation. OK, now strangle and knife a bunch of goons from behind. Shoot everybody. You're saving the world.

Boss monsters that you can only hurt when they open their mouths: Actually, I kind of like that. What if they have armoured skin? It makes perfect sense.

Invisible walls: Don't walk off the edge of the screen, that's not where your character would go. He's not interested in what happens outside the village right now. Play nice.

Crates: Personally, what I like to do is buy a giant ceramic pot, or a huge crate, then stick maybe one roast chicken in it, or ammunition for a gun I don't own, then leave it around the apartment for those occasions when strangers who walk in to ask me about a cave in the hills need to start smashing my shit before they feel ready to leave. Oh right, I wasn't going to talk about crates. But this isn't about stacking them or pushing them on pressure plates. Totally different.

Quick-time events: I'm Jason Bourne. I can make a deadly weapon out of a box of tissues. I can improvise my way out of the tightest scrapes. Push exactly these buttons at the right time to watch this cutscene of me beating some guys up really fast. Games traditionally haven't been able to figure out how to give players adequate control over beating guys up really fast, so we had to rely on cutscenes. But at least you get to push the buttons during the cutscenes. That's because it's your game.

Animals have pockets filled with gold and equipment: Is it really necessary to reward players for literally every accomplishment?

Data logs: It's the future. When we need to capture some fleeting thought, we get out a fancy metal box the size of a briefcase, covered in lights and tubes. It can record seconds of speech with a crackling, tinny sound. Then we drop them to the ground and wander around the space station, because being organised is so 20th century.

The password that recently got updated so the boss needs to post a memo up so everyone knows: Just to make sure everyone has the new password.

The hero/loser: You're the best field agent in our organisation. But you won't get to evolve your character if you actually start off as powerful as we claim you are. So we're sending you in with the weakest gun we have. And only a few rounds of ammo. When you get to the mission, try to look around for some body armour or something. Also, you should really acquire some skills. You kind of suck.

Randy Smith is a lead game designer at EA's LA studio. His current project is a collaboration with Steven Spielberg

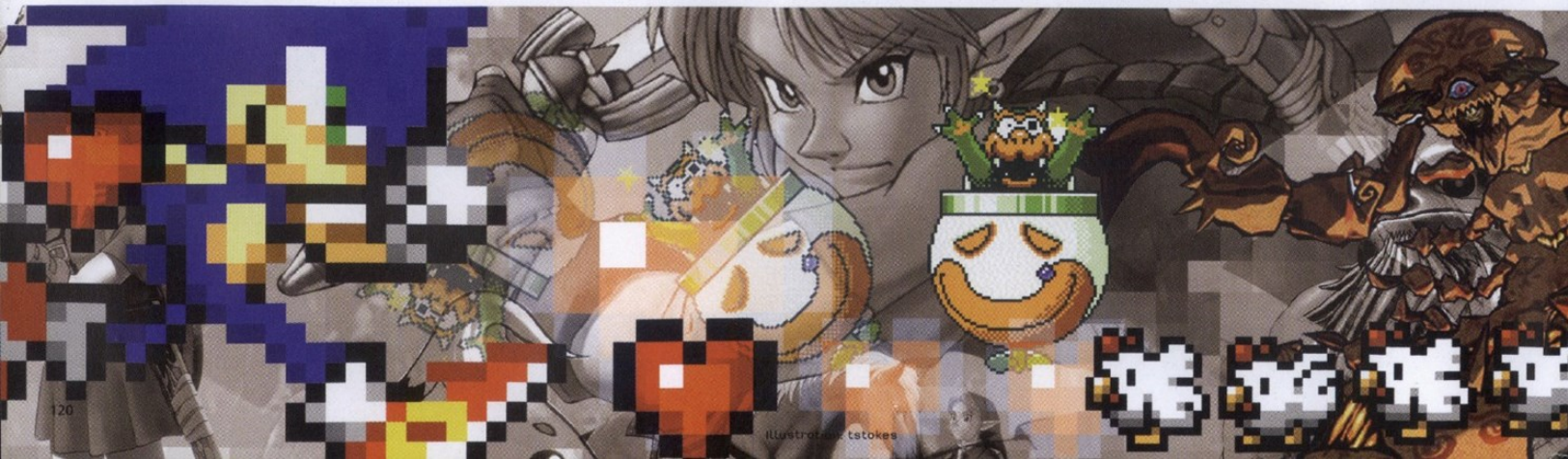


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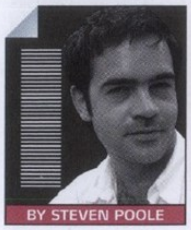
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BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

In control of a panic

I am an air traffic controller! The rhythm of a shift is unpredictable. One minute I am idly tapping my foot along to blippy electro-funk, the next I am frantically giving orders to six aircraft at once and breathing a huge sigh of relief as a plane that is landing just misses smashing into the rear of another plane taking off from the same runway. Keep your holding pattern, flight 701. Flight 305, you are cleared to taxi. Flight 504, go to gate 16. Oh no, hang on...

There is a class of videogames built specifically to inculcate a feeling of what we might characterise as 'cognitive panic'. Caught in a blizzard of decision procedures, the player has no leisure to plan but must manage a constant emergency. Moments of cognitive panic provide the adrenaline juice in most action games, whether you are defending an immobilised tank from marauders on all sides in *Call Of Duty 4* or slicing round a corner while making weapon-management decisions in *Wipeout HD*; but it's realtime strategy games – such as the DS's lovely *Air Traffic Chaos* – that are, fundamentally, hardcore cognitive panic toys.

> "I am frantically giving orders to six aircraft at once and breathing a sigh of relief as a plane that is landing just misses one taking off"

The obvious question is this: why is cognitive panic pleasurable? When we experience it in real life, on one of those days where everything goes wrong at the same time and there seems to be a never-ending hail of demands on your attention, it's not usually very welcome. Indeed, the phrase 'cognitive panic' is sometimes used in psychiatric medicine to describe a panic attack with the mental symptoms ('fear of losing control or going crazy') but not the physical ones ('feeling of choking', 'nausea') described in the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual. Why would videogamers seek out the kind of stress that makes people seek professional help?

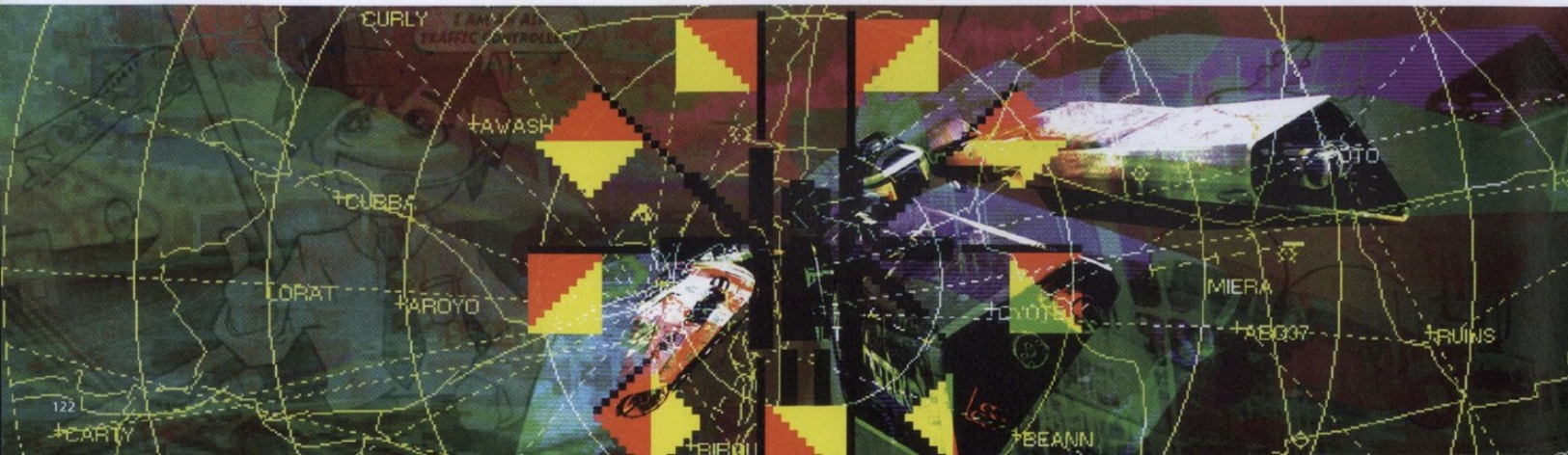
At the Naval Medical Center in San Diego, soldiers returning from war with post-traumatic stress disorder are encouraged to play through reconstructions in a 'virtual Iraq', where things are initially calm, but then violent events and sensory overload are gradually ramped up until it finally begins to replicate the original trauma as closely as possible. Navy psychologist **Karen Perlman** was quoted in the LA Times last year as saying: "Habituation occurs when they repeat their story over and over again. They start to learn they can tolerate their distress, they can work through it." The treatment depends on the stress not being somehow diluted, but replicated as closely as possible, so that the patient can learn to manage it. Still, the fact that the 'virtual Iraq' is known to be imaginary provides a crucial safety valve. "The great thing about virtual reality," said research leader Lt Cmdr **Robert McLay**, "is that you can turn it off."

On a more trivial level, could it be that cognitive panic as entertainment performs a low-level therapeutic role? If I learn to sail through the expert levels of *Air Traffic Chaos* with a super-functioning zen serenity, will I be better equipped to handle stressful situations in real life? Well, one should hesitate to make such general claims. The daddy of technical air-traffic-control simulators on the PC, *ATCsimulator2*, is pretty much obligatory among those who intend to train as air traffic controllers in real life, but you wouldn't necessarily recommend it as an essential adjunct to a student of brain surgery. (She would want *Trauma Centre*, of course.) On the other hand, an ability to manage cognitive panic looks as though it ought to be high on the list of potentially 'transferable' or generalisable skills that we can practice in videogames. More research on this question is needed.

Conversely, though, one might also wonder whether part of the reason why the generation of videogamers in their 30s and older express an increasing dissatisfaction with modern games is that maturing adults derive less and less pleasure from the unnecessary engineering of cognitive panic. After all, they've got enough to worry about with the credit crunch and the job market. Personally, I used to be rigorously intolerant of turn-based videogames, but in recent years I have much preferred *Advance Wars* to any RTS, and I prefer both *Metal Gear Acid* games to their PSP stablemate *Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops*.

This is not to say that my twitch synapses are burned out: I still prefer *Guns Of The Patriots* to just about everything – which is, dear readers, why I keep banging on about it in these columns. But *Metal Gear Solid 4* is germane to the topic at hand, too. After all, its rhythm of stress and recovery could be seen as an allegory of gamers' ambivalence about cognitive panic. Perhaps Old Snake represents a physical manifestation of the Gen X gamer's ageing brain, increasingly vulnerable to stress and given to wondering whether it's all worth it – but still, when it really counts, "pretty good".

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames, and isn't really an air traffic controller



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Tom Williams: Technical Director - Blackrock Studio

Graduates say:

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BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

Army of two (or more)

When videogame historians look back at the year 2008, two developments will immediately stand out. The first is that it's been a banner year for downloadable console games. Whether it was the PlayStation Network (*Echochrome*, *PixelJunk Eden* and *The Last Guy*), Xbox Live Arcade (*Braid* and *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved 2*) or WiiWare (*LostWinds* and *World Of Goo*), the online stores for each of the three major platforms served up bite-sized titles that were pound for pound as entertaining and engrossing as their full-sized counterparts.

Sure, it's been another stellar year for disc-based games; the preceding 12 months have produced, as I write, such highly rated games as *Grand Theft Auto IV*, *Metal Gear Solid 4*, *Fallout 3*, *LittleBigPlanet* and *Gears Of War 2*. And, yes, there is a lingering bias by some, when summing up the year in videogames, to gloss over short-session titles. Nevertheless, I fully expect two or more of the aforementioned small games to make it on to the various and sundry Top Ten lists for 2008.

> "Co-op serves as a motivator for me to start and finish games that I might not have completed were it not for teaming up with a friend"

If the May through October time period was enough to make 2008 The Year of Downloadable Games, a two-week period in November saw the release of three titles – *Resistance 2*, *Gears Of War 2* and *Left 4 Dead* – that comprise the second and arguably more interesting development: the breakthroughs that game creators have made with co-op play that goes beyond adding support for more players to the story mode. Each studio went its own way. Insomniac built a separate co-op campaign for up to eight players, modelled after raids in massively multiplayer online games. Epic not only lets you play the main campaign with one other friend, but also created a new mode called Horde, in which as many as five players take on wave after wave of Locust enemies on the same maps used in *Gears Of War 2*'s multiplayer mode. Valve, for its part, pits up to four players against massive, relentless and fast-moving packs of zombies, hounding gamers into eschewing lone-wolf tactics for the wisdom of teamwork whether it's in the singleplayer/co-op campaign or in the versus mode where four player-controlled humans face off against four player-controlled infected bosses.

Insomniac's approach is at once the most intriguing and the least fully fleshed out, mainly because it appears to have been designed with just a single strategy for success: soldiers out front, spec ops in the middle, and medics bringing up the rear. Whether the enemy AI or the encounter design is to blame I can't be sure, but if Insomniac can find a way to mix things up more it has the template for something both unique and special in the world of consoles. Epic's spin on co-op, by contrast, is completely straightforward – and that's precisely why it's so enthralling. By marrying play mechanics (run, take cover, active reload) and AI behaviours that have been buffed to perfection over two games against the brilliant simplicity of two to five players trying to defeat each new set of enemies as it spawns, Horde achieves the arcadey perfection that *The Club* never quite managed. And while *Left 4 Dead*'s battles may seem as chaotic as those in *Resistance 2*, they aren't. That's because Valve's much-touted AI director technology – aided and abetted by a terrific score and sound design – paces the encounters masterfully against the backdrop of levels that have been carefully constructed for both navigation and confrontation.

Now, there's nothing wrong with giving players the ability to play a game's campaign mode with their friends. In fact I approve wholeheartedly. Co-op serves as a motivator for me to start and finish games that I might not have completed in a timely fashion were it not for teaming up with a friend. It adds a social element, whether it's planning strategy with my teammate or simply commiserating over having to retry a boss battle for the umpteenth time. And despite what I may have said last month about why developers should reconsider how they approach a game's difficulty, one of the side benefits of a co-op campaign is that it allows me to play a game's story mode on a higher difficulty setting than I would have otherwise; that's how I wound up finishing *Halo 3* on Heroic and even tackling several of the levels on Legendary. I get to experience the enemies at their toughest with the help of my comrades, rather than being beaten into submission over and over again. Challenge without undue amounts of failure – what's not to like? But as much as enjoy a co-op campaign, I can't help but feel as though co-op gameplay brings with it a set of possibilities that are worthy of more exploration, untethered by the dictates of a story that has been authored for a single player – or untethered from story entirely. And for two weeks in November, three of the industry's best developers pointed their peers in that direction. Kudos.

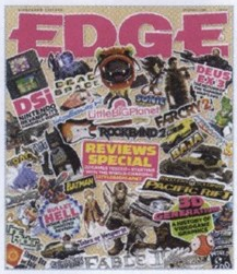
N'Gai Croal writes about technology for Newsweek. His blog can be found at blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup





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inbox



Issue 195

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

forum.edge-online.co.uk

Topic: Least favourite Achievement

My current least favourite is Rebound in *Geometry Wars* 2. No matter what I do, or how I play, I keep running out of time with 68/75 or so, or one frankly ridiculous controller-smashing 73/75.
Elmlea

My least favourite is Lost the Plot (Shot limit exceeded) on *Tiger Woods 09*. It was a particular hole on Pebble Beach where I was stuck teetering on the cliff edge and it was really windy. I put the ball in the ocean 3 times! My OCD answer would be any achievement that doesn't have a points value ending in 5 or 0. Haha! I hate untidy gamerscores like 13,597.
Curtis

Try Black Belt Grandmaster on *Mutant Storm Reloaded*. Here's a tip; you won't be able to achieve it.
BigPapi

After reading the letter from Ben Lathwell [E195], I have to agree. I was also given a assignment to find industry professionals (in this case scriptwriters). Being a lowly student I decided to keep my search within the UK, and contacted Rockstar North, Criterion Games and Free Radical Design for an interview with their writers. Rockstar North told me to email them – no response; Criterion's Craig Sullivan told me to email him – still no response; and Free Radical Design told me to email them as well – still no response, email-wise. However, I did manage to get into contact with FRD's writer and he was more than happy to be interviewed.

Lathwell is quite right – they should be more open to the upcoming workers if they wish for them to be involved, not blatantly ignore emails. Even TV writers gave more of a direct response. They said no – after all, they are very busy – but they replied none the less.

Samuel Mottershaw

I am writing in response to Ben Lathwell. First and foremost, I completely sympathise with Ben; I was in the same situation a couple of years ago and also wondered why the level of response was so poor.

I am now employed by Rebellion, and feel I may be able to shed some light on the situation and perhaps plead the case from the other side.

There is one fundamental thing to remember, which is that ultimately the people you are contacting have a job to do which *will* take precedence, I'm afraid. Multiply your enquiries by the number of students in your class, then by the number of courses across the country, and you can see that games companies will be deluged with similar correspondence, and unless studios employ someone specifically to respond to such queries (or course leaders introduce their students to the idea of industry contact in a more staggered timeframe), this will always be an issue.

It's a shame to hear that EA have put their university relations programme on hold, although it is encouraging that they are considering one in the first place. Prior to working at Rebellion, I found myself teaching animation to higher education students and, in light of this, I have time allocated in my schedule to encourage me to return to teaching and keep students informed about good working practices, what software or technologies will be relevant to them upon graduation, what is good or bad to include in showreels or portfolios, and generally give advice and support for both their work and their software questions. In addition to this, Rebellion allows people to visit the studio and gain some work experience but, again, there are limited spaces.

Although I cannot speak for other companies, Rebellion are keen to build good relations with the educational side of the industry, as better prepared students make for better potential employees, and I personally relish the opportunity to show students 'the cool stuff' (classes being what they are, and with industry software being so vast, it's impossible to teach it all in a conventional class structure).

Hopefully in the near future other companies will be more forthcoming with their efforts to, as Ben rightly described, 'develop the next generation of the industry', but in the meantime I offer the following encouragement for students to aid their correspondence:

Use email – letters can get lost or 'filed' under a mountain of other work.

If your email contains the phrase 'a few questions', don't follow it with 50.

Be polite and realistic – this may seem like a no-brainer, but you'd be surprised how many students try to overwhelm with knowledge of obscure software and simply want to hear that they know best already.

Lastly, it's worth reiterating you are corresponding with someone with a job to do, and if they've already replied to several similar emails that morning then it is up to you to stand out and make your words worth responding to.

I wish everyone in a similar situation to Ben the very best of luck!

Martin Kennedy

Developers should be more open to the upcoming workers if they wish for them to be involved, not blatantly ignore emails



Letter of the month wins a DS Lite

As the one and only game industry professional who made the time to respond to Ben's concerns, Martin, have a DS Lite for your efforts.

Having just read **E194**'s Something About Japan, I feel compelled to respond. Mr Bardo laments the the advent of 'pay per' downloadable content. While I take his point, is levelling up for a price so bad? Putting aside the financial aspect, is it that different from the cheat code? I am in favour of micropayments in games, and can see ways in which they could benefit gamers, not just increase revenue for the gaming industry.

As the years go by and gaming slips into mainstream culture, 'gamers' are becoming an ever more diverse group. While many of us, myself included, choose not to use cheat codes, some prefer to take an easier route.

My children have watched, mystified, as I have battled through a game. While they, in their impatience, have used a code to gain invincibility or unlimited credits to reach the finale weeks, or months, before me. What we do have in common is a love of games. gaming as we know it, but why should we care? At least it is widening the appeal of gaming.

Does it really matter if someone buys themselves an advantage? Publishers could use this revenue from DLC to make their millions, enabling them to distribute the basic game more cheaply, or better still, free. Surely this could only be a good thing for the so-called hardcore gamer?
Sean Dominy

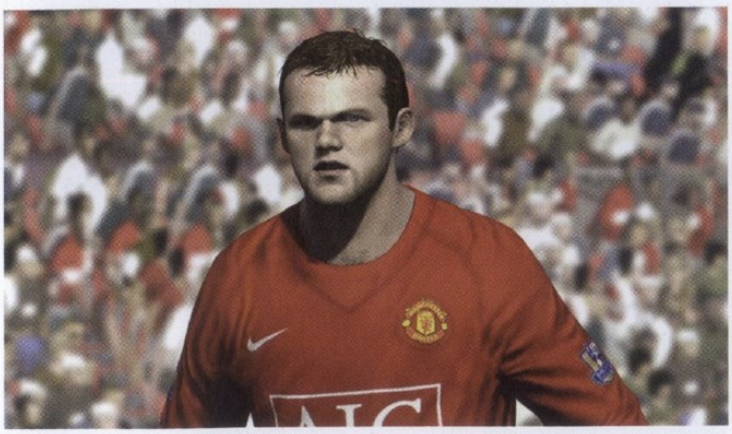
Does such DLC also show up game mechanics such as levelling as more work than play? Just asking.

Having just received the last **Edge** I'm a little perplexed as to why you've neglected to review the new *Pro Evo* and *FIFA* for the second year running (actually, come to think of it, you may have reviewed *FIFA* last year). If there's any subject that casts videogamers against each other in virtual holy war then it's the arguments over these two products. It's the only computer game subject the non-gamey chaps in my office discuss.

If there's any subject that casts videogamers against each other in virtual holy war then it's the arguments over FIFA and Pro Evo

And frankly, if someone just wanted to skip ahead and merely watch the cutscenes, why not? (Actually, it has just occurred to me that maybe developers could edit cutscenes to make sense as a standalone story if run together to cater to this group.) Not

I don't need to tell you how popular football is. Most watched sport in Britain, third biggest participant sport



This year's edition of *FIFA* shows that EA has caught up with (or, some would argue, surpassed) Konami, and Derek Brown believes we should be following such developments much more closely

Topic: Creating friendly online communities

I don't bother playing with randoms any more as it's just depressing. Not just the abuse but the cheating that goes on (ramming in racing games, ridiculous betting in poker). Nintendo haven't even bothered getting into such shenanigans, and some wouldn't blame them. Microsoft and Sony are both launching new products in November designed to get people meeting and fostering new online communities. So what can they do to help people get along? If they are serious about stopping abuse then why not make the console constantly record the last 30 seconds of audio from people's mics? Or automatically penalise people who drop out of games when they're losing. Alternatively, rank up people who finish all of their games and match reliable players with other reliable players.
Bombfrog

Nintendo's system is clearly awesome and the best, because you're not allowed to play unless you're already friends in real life. Thus any online communities formed are friendly by their very construction. It's such an elegant and easy to use system.
Pause

From the outside it looks truly horrendous I have to say. Massive serial numbers per game and no mics? Eugh.
Dan Dare

How about corralling those who do have bad rep into a different zone and then forcing them to play with each other for a period of time?
ubermod

I never play with randoms. That's why I have huge friends lists of people from this place. The only time I really encounter randoms is in forum vs randoms team games.
g.man

To a certain extent, whatever rules are in place, you're gonna have to accept that a lot of these games are made for teenage boys and encourage competitive behaviour.
JB



Sean Dominy calls Brick Bardo's views into question, saying that buying your way to extra content in an RPG like *Tales Of Vesperia* is comparable to making use of a cheat code

(behind angling and golf, if you're wondering) and the talk of pubs and offices everywhere, blah blah blah. It just seems a shame that such a great magazine seems to have neglected them. Especially as the pendulum is swinging to EA. I may be jumping the gun and you may have a tale of the tape lined up for next month but for me, alas, it's too late. I have yet again splashed my money on *Pro Evo* only to realise it is a laggy, inadequate shadow of its former self. Ah, well. I never learn. *FIFA* on the other hand is rather good, though not perfect.
Derek Brown

There are many games we don't review, and football sims have fallen into the same category as golf and flight sims in recent years. But drop us an email if you agree with Derek. If there's enough interest, we'll change the policy.

I decided to dig out my old Xbox to have another crack at *Doom 3* following your recent article. To my horror, its top was thick with dust.

Out of the 11 different machines I own this one by far is the worst for keeping clean, yet with Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft touting their wares as 'entertainment centres' you'd think they would have given more consideration to keeping dust away. My TV, DVD and CD player are relatively easy to keep clean, but the jumble of wires and peripheral tat you need to use consoles is a bugger to keep in order... Oh well, *Fable II* will have to wait; it's back on with the pinny.
Jonathan Condliffe

You should see the state of our gaming room. Our maid can never get it clean. Perhaps we should set up some kind of walk-in charity auction and finally get rid of all these FM Towns joypads, Neo-Geo CD games and so on...

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